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

Chapter 71 : Swordmaster (1)

Swordmaster (1)

The opening of the Dragon Sword Hall was postponed by two weeks.

Given the major incident of the Heavenly Sword Lord's youngest daughter being kidnapped, it was inevitable that a large-scale investigation covering the entire Heavenly Sword Palace would begin.

However, it was more of a formality; in reality, it was a purge operation to expel supporters of Theo's faction.

There was a major reshuffling of personnel across all institutions within the Heavenly Sword Palace, and the Dragon Sword Hall was no exception.

Theo's faction had been that large.

Most likely, these two weeks were to allow enough time to assign new instructors to the Dragon Sword Hall and to complete the transition.

'From my perspective, it actually worked out well.'

For Ian, it was a stroke of luck.

'Because I gained plenty of time to practice aura cultivation.'

Inside Vladiark, there was truly a mountain of aura waiting to be absorbed.

He desperately needed time to train alone, and with the opening of the Dragon Sword Hall delayed, he was able to claim that time.

'If I devote as much time as possible to training during these two weeks, and pull all-nighters every other day...'

By the time the Hall opens, he might be able to reach the entry-stage of Swordmaster.

'However...'

The spots left vacant by Theo's faction would naturally be filled by Aris's faction.

'Just thinking about Aris's growing influence is giving me a headache already.'

Ian rubbed his forehead.

'If Aris's faction takes control of the Dragon Sword Hall...'

In effect, it would be as if Ian was lying squarely in Aris's palm.

'Aris will want to dig up all the abilities I'm hiding.'

She had already shown an intense interest in Ian.

What exactly she wanted, he still wasn't sure, but...

'I'm sure it's nothing good.'

Aris was certainly a villain.

Regardless of her motives, ultimately, her head would be filled only with thoughts of exploiting Ian.

'I need to get stronger as quickly as possible.'

So that whenever Aris reaches out her claws, he can easily brush her off.

'Time is gold. Let's start right away.'

Thus began two weeks of intensive training.

In the morning, he taught swordsmanship to Sophia.

— Whoosh! Snap! Whoosh! Snap!

"I definitely think I grow the fastest when I learn from you, young master!"

"That's true now, but eventually, practicing on your own will be more important. You need to find your own style."

"Yes!"

In the afternoon, Sophia trained on her own to build stamina.

"Huff, huff! One! Two!"

Ian focused on aura training.

"....."

One day, then two, three, four, five days like this.

With no one disturbing Ian and Sophia, peaceful days passed by...

"A letter from the Heavenly Sword Lord, for me...?"

A letter had arrived from the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"Yes, the Lord sent a letter directly addressed to you, young master Ian. It is handwritten, so please handle it carefully."

"A h-handwritten letter...?"

A genuine handwritten letter.

Who in the entire Heavenly Sword Palace could claim to have received such a letter written by the Lord himself?

"Hmmm..."

Ian fiddled with the envelope, looking baffled.

He could hardly imagine the Lord, who always seemed to overlook everything with the radiant energy of the sun, quietly sitting at a desk and writing with a pen.

"Uh, well, thank you."

That day, Ian postponed his afternoon training for a bit and decided to check the letter first.

'Even the Lord's handwriting is impressive.'

Meticulously aligned sentences.

Strokes drawn with confidence and boldness.

The calligraphy was both neat and dynamic.

'But...'

The lines were rather dense.

The pale apricot-colored letter paper now almost looked black.

'He must have had a lot to say.'

The letter was long.

But, to summarize, the contents were simple.

— Thank you for saving my youngest daughter, Yuria.

— I wish I could speak to you in person, but since I absolutely cannot leave my post, I must settle for this letter.

— The expedition is likely to take longer than expected. I'm curious how you've been doing.

— I've prepared a gift. I hope you'll like it.

Up to here, it was fine.

The passage carried the Lord's goodwill and warmth.

But then...

From the next part on...

— My eldest daughter, Aris, seems to have taken quite a liking to you.

— I reflected much of Aris's opinion when preparing this gift.

— Aris may be like a big sister to you, but to me, both of you are still children.

— There's barely more than a ten-year age difference between you two.

— Considering the slow aging and long lifespan of the Hisperion, that barely counts as an age gap.

— If you two meet often, you'll find you have much in common, so please try to get close and be friends.

"....."

Somehow, the Lord seemed to wish for Ian to become close with Aris.

"..... No way....."

No matter how much the Lord wished for it, some things were simply out of the question.

'..... There's no way I'm getting tangled up with that crazy woman.'

Ian would sooner run away from Heavenly Sword Palace with Yuria than get mixed up with Aris.

If he ever got close to Aris, he'd end up as a mindless slave within two years, at best.

Be it brainwashing, dark magic, or some other sinister sorcery...

"Ugh."

Ian shuddered at the sudden wave of dread.

'Enough with that horrific thought. Let's check the gifts.'

There were three boxes accompanying the letter.

One thin and flat.

One long and slender.

And one about the size of an arm.

Ian carefully unwrapped the flat, broad box first.

"Oh...!"

The moment he saw what was inside, he couldn't help exclaiming in awe.

"Amazing!"

The first gift from the Lord was a secret manual for aura training.

A breathing technique deeply imbued with the power and mystery of thunder.

It was Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds (穹雷雷雲深).

'Exactly what I needed, as if he read my mind!'

Until now, the Heavenly Dawn Technique alone had sufficed, but after becoming a Swordmaster, a new cultivation method was necessary.

'If I keep building aura solely with the Heavenly Dawn Technique, it'll be obvious.'

When projecting Swordmaster's enhanced energy using Heavenly Dawn Technique, it had a distinctive sun-like golden hue.

If Ian wanted to conceal the fact that he was secretly mastering the Hisperion's secret technique, it was about time to adopt a different method—and just in time, he received the perfect one as a present.

'This technique is nearly on par with Heavenly Dawn Technique.'

Of course, in terms of speed or efficiency of cultivation, it couldn't match Heavenly Dawn Technique.

Heavenly Dawn Technique was one of the world's premier cultivation methods.

'But Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds also has its unique advantages!'

Objectively, its speed alone placed it among the top echelon of breathing techniques, and above all, it had a trait that Heavenly Dawn Technique did not.

'The greatest advantage: it allows the accumulation of thunder-type aura.'

Thunder attribute.

Aura of thunder and lightning.

Thunder attribute aura had the drawback of being unruly and unpredictable, making it hard to control, but if mastered, nothing surpassed it.

There's no power as quick or fierce as lightning.

'The first gift is already incredible...'

Ian, brimming with anticipation, unwrapped the second gift.

This time it was the long, slender box.

"Ah. This!"

The second gift was Dellen's longsword, Flostilla.

'They're giving... this to me?'

Ordinarily, when the chosen sword from the sword spirit ceremony's user died, the blade was returned to the inner vault.

Occasionally, in special cases, it was passed down to a child, or personally reclaimed for use by the Lord.

If the designated user had committed treason, it might be given as a reward to one who performed great service.

'Not bad.'

Flostilla was a sword Ian had used frequently in his past life.

It found its way into his hands once again.

'In the end, perhaps swords have as much fate as people do.'

Everything comes full circle, returning to its master.

'So, then, the last gift...?'

The arm-sized box.

"Wow..."

Upon unwrapping it, he found a bracelet containing subspace storage magic.

'They're going this far for me?'

Subspace artifacts were extremely rare, and correspondingly, extremely valuable.

Even the cheapest would cost tens of thousands of gold.

'The subspace runestones required for making such artifacts were phenomenally rare.'

For the average person, it was more than a lifetime's earnings, even working nonstop.

'With this, I can carry dozens of swords at once.'

For someone with Ian's gift for wielding a wide variety of swords, such a subspace artifact was especially useful.

'If I collect a bunch of swords like Flostilla and store them in this bracelet, I'd be able to overwhelm most enemies just by unleashing their sword spirits in sequence.'

And that had been one of Ian's principal fighting methods in his previous life too.

Powering up with gear, based on his gift for quickly grasping the nature of swords.

This was also why, in his previous life, Ian, who had barely reached late-stage Swordmaster, could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with many Grandmasters.

'The gifts supposedly reflect much of Aris's opinion.'

There's no way Aris could know about Ian's past life.

Most likely...

She saw Ian using Flostilla with such mastery, and thought to gift him that legendary sword and subspace bracelet.

'Does she think I have an ability to freely wield any sword?'

And so, she gave him equipment that would allow him to exploit that ability to the fullest.

It made perfect sense.

After all, there was someone in the Heavenly Sword Palace with a similar talent to Ian's.

'Sword Fiend Silence Doomraven.'

A member of Hisperion's guest retainers, a quirky mercenary at the Grandmaster rank.

This man could wield any sword with incredible proficiency, as if he had used it for thirty years, even the first time touching it.

'But he can only handle magic swords and demon swords so freely.'

Whereas Ian had no such limits.

Ian was already gifted to nearly superhuman levels, and thanks to experience from his past life, had a wealth of know-how.

With so much experience taming different swords, he had now reached a state where after a few swings, he instinctively knew how to use even a sword he'd never seen before.

'If that's how Aris saw me, then she wasn't wrong.'

In truth, Ian could wield any sword with ease—even new ones.

Of course, he was even confident in unlocking their sword spirits.

'This is crazy. Insane, even.'

A top-tier aura cultivation method, a legendary sword, and an artifact valuable enough to buy a castle.

'Even though I did help save Yuria...'

Honestly, even just one of these would have been more than enough reward.

'Is this just an investment, then?'

The Lord wants Ian as his closest aide.

He must be trying to win Ian's favor with these generous gifts.

'If that was his aim...'

He's partially succeeded.

Ian still couldn't swear undying loyalty to the Lord, but if circumstances called for him to raise his sword for the Lord, he could now do so with little hesitation.

'Alright then. Time to put these away and get back to training.'

Maybe it was the mood from receiving such extravagant gifts, but...

Training went especially well that day.

The next day...

"Uuu... I'm hungry from all the blood they took..."

As soon as the infirmary at the Heavenly Sword Palace reopened, Ian took Sophia for a medical checkup.

"Meat... I need to eat meat."

"Again? We already had some yesterday. Today, let's think about nutrition—a salad with eggs or fish..."

"Meat... I can't remember the taste of meat."

"Like I said, we ate it yesterday."

"I can't remember the taste of meat! This is a serious problem!!!"

"... Alright. Fine, let's eat meat. Pork okay?"

"Pork! That's the best! Yayyyy!"

That day, they went home and enjoyed a feast, taking the day off.

The next morning, the Master Alchemist of the Heavenly Sword Palace's Workshop came to visit.

"Young master Ian. Here are the Elder Vampiric Sense you ordered last time."

He could have sent an underling.

But the Workshop Master visited in person and greeted Ian with a deep bow.

Is this court etiquette? Or maneuvering? Or politics, perhaps?

The Workshop Master seemed eager to grow closer to Ian.

'Doesn't seem like he'd gain much from befriending me, though.'

Still, he didn't seem like a bad person, so Ian shared a cup of tea with him.

"I never imagined I would receive the Elder Vampiric Sense so soon. The materials I provided were all substitute-quality, so I thought it would take longer to cultivate."

"We have many useful artifacts in the Workshop. We also use relics from the Luminari. However, with a limited number of devices, we always process the most important orders first. This time, we used a cultivation accelerator. We only have one in the entire Workshop."

The Workshop Master subtly emphasized that he had paid special attention to Ian's order.

But what Ian picked up on was not that roundabout suggestion.

'So there are Luminari among the Workshop staff here.'

Using and handling the relics of powerful ancient magical civilizations was a racial specialty of the Luminari, and someday Ian would need to project that as well.

'Last time, I couldn't project Kelbian's forehead jewel because I didn't have enough aura.'

Once he becomes a Swordmaster, it wouldn't be a bad idea to seek out the Luminari in the Workshop and attempt projection.

Chapter 72 : Swordmaster (2)

Swordmaster (2)

Before anyone noticed, time had passed...

There was now only a single day left until the opening of the Sword Dragon Hall.

Ian had spent about two weeks relentlessly absorbing the aura stored in Vladiark, and succeeded in reaching the entry-stage of Swordmaster-rank.

'I really did it...!'

He had become a Swordmaster at the mere age of 14.

This was an achievement a full four years faster than the previous record set by Ragnar, head of the Five Heavenly Sword Clans—the fastest in human history.

A monumental feat that would be eternally engraved in both history and legend was achieved quietly in the basement of Heavenly Sword Palace's side building.

"Alright...!"

Truly an incredible speed of growth.

At this rate, it might even be possible to surpass the level he reached in his previous life and become a fully-fledged Grandmaster before turning 18.

'If this rate of growth continues from here on out...'

Eleven years from now.

By the time the demon world's grand dukes invade this world, just how much stronger will he have become?

'Vladiark. You are the key to my growth. Keep helping me from here on out.'

— Woooong!

Ian's heart raced with excitement and joy, but he did his best to calm himself.

There was still a long road ahead.

It was time to focus on the remaining tasks before the Sword Dragon Hall officially opened.

'Let's focus again.'

Thanks to the massive growth in his aura, he could now easily project Elder Vampiric Sense.

—《Authority of Projection》—

◆Item

[Elder Vampiric Sense Lv.71]

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The projection level of Elder Vampiric Sense was a whopping '71'.

The highest level among anything he'd ever projected so far.

As expected... It was a level worthy of a stimulant that raised one's senses to the Swordmaster level.

'Let's try it right away. I need to see how it feels.'

Ian moved to the private training room in the basement.

In one corner of the room, which resembled a stone dueling arena, there was a magical control panel used to set training modes.

It was possible to summon golems for sparring, or training devices that fired concealed weapons for reaction training—an advanced magical training system.

'This time, let's go with the concealed weapon reaction training.'

He set the difficulty at mid-Master level.

'If I can get through this with ease...'

The reason Ian wanted Elder Vampiric Sense.

He would then be able to safely counter Yuria's Heavenly Flow 4th Form.

— Wooooong!

— Tsk! Tsk! Tsk!

As soon as he pressed the start button, the magic control panel disappeared into the wall, and sinister mechanical devices began rising from various spots in the training room.

— Chunk!

Ian gripped Vladiark's hilt even tighter and projected Elder Vampiric Sense into his abdomen.

— Tssssss!

For a moment, his vision blurred, but quickly became clear again, with everything now much sharper.

'Not bad at all.'

Not just his sight, but his hearing, sense of touch, and every other sense had all become so sensitive that they far surpassed the entry-stage of the Swordmaster-rank.

'Let's do this.'

Ian lowered his stance.

It was time to test the performance of combining entry-stage Swordmaster senses with Elder Vampiric Sense.

* * *

Lunabreeze Residence.

Now evening.

"Mmm... I'm hungry..."

Having just finished a grueling physical workout and showered, Sophia draped a towel around her neck and patted her growling stomach as she headed for the kitchen.

'Hm? Where is Young Master?'

He usually came to the kitchen first in the evenings.

Always saying that diet was important for training.

Mostly to stop Sophia from being picky with her food.

'Is he showering?'

Sophia moved toward the first-floor shower.

But there was neither any sign of him nor the sound of running water.

'So he's not showering... where could he be?'

She checked the garden—no one.

She checked the vegetable patch—he wasn't there.

She checked the outdoor training ground—absent again.

'Is he in the basement training room?'

If he was still training, he'd be there.

'Geez... How can someone not realize it's mealtime!?'

He even skipped lunch, so Sophia had to eat alone!

'The Young Master is generally a thorough person, but...'

Sometimes when he became absorbed in something, he neglected his own well-being completely.

'Hmph. In the end, if I don't take care of things, Young Master would be in trouble.'

Muttering that Ian definitely needed her, Sophia headed down to the basement.

- CHAANG! CHING! CHAAAANG! KAAANG!

"...?"

But as soon as she entered the basement hallway, she heard the screeching clash of metal.

"Huh?"

The sound of blades striking.

"Wh-what!?"

What is that noise!?

She could tell it was swords clashing, but why would it be coming from the basement training room!?

'N-no way!'

Was Young Master fighting someone!? Trading blows with swords!?

"Ah!"

Sophia's heart plummeted.

"Y-Young Master!?"

She rushed toward the training room with her little feet.

— CHING! CHAANG! CHACHACHANG! KWACHIK!

The closer she got to the training room, the more intense the clashing of blades became.

The pace grew so fast, it was now impossible to count how many times swords met per second.

— KAAAAANG! KAANG! CHACHACHANG!

With terrifying metallic crashes, the sound of metal shattering grew louder.

'Young Master Ian! Young Master!'

Soon, Sophia arrived at the basement training room where Ian was present.

"Huh...?"

The scene inside was completely different from anything Sophia had imagined.

— KAANG! KANG! CHAANG! CHACHACHANG!

There were no masked villains or assassins as she'd imagined.

Instead—

Ian was standing in the middle of the training room, deflecting throwing weapons flying toward him from all directions.

The stream of concealed weapons pouring at him was nothing short of a torrential downpour.

"W-what...!"

But it was clear there was nothing to worry about.

Ian's technique was so incredible that not a single blade could even brush him in that storm.

"That's... insane..."

Was that even humanly possible?

— PABABAT!

The speed of the throwing knives shot from the concealed weapon launcher was as fierce and swift as bullets.

— CHANG!

But Ian moved even faster.

— CHACHACHACHANG!

Ian spun his body and greatsword freely, as if swimming on water, deflecting every incoming weapon.

"H-how is that even possible..."

Sophia stared in awe, not realizing her jaw had dropped.

Each time Ian waved his sword, the weapons shattered and scattered into clouds of magic particles.

It looked just like stars scattering in all directions.

The curves Ian's movements and sword traced looked like dancing, like painting— beautiful.

— CHWARARANG!

Just like rowing atop the Milky Way, Ian's blade sliced through the air once more.

At the same time, all the starlike falling weapons were shattered and dropped to the ground.

"Wow..."

Only then did Sophia let out the breath she'd been holding.

She didn't even realize how long she'd been holding her breath watching Ian.

'Th-this is Young Master's true ability...'

It was a level of swordsmanship worlds apart from what he showed her when teaching.

For Sophia, who was seeing a Master's prowess for the first time today, the shock was even greater.

'My goodness...'

She realized anew how high a mountain she was trying to climb.

"Y-Young Master! Young Master Ian!"

His name burst from her lips like an exclamation.

"A-amazing! What was that just now!? How did you do that!?"

She knew Ian was much stronger than her, but she never imagined it would be to this extent!

"Wow...! Is it even possible to get this strong just one month after awakening aura!? That's crazy! You're a total genius!!"

Sophia hurried over and wiped the sweat from Ian's forehead with the towel she'd had around her neck.

"Great job!"

"Thank you, Sophia."

Although, for some reason, the towel was a bit damp...

* * *

That night.

"zzZ..."

Sophia had fallen asleep, oblivious to the world.

'I can't sleep...'

Ian simply lay there, staring up at the ceiling.

'Is this another side effect of Elder Vampiric Sense?'

Insomnia.

'There really isn't any such thing as a free lunch.'

While Elder Vampiric Sense flowed in his blood, all of his senses felt twice as strong.

Even during training, he could distinctly hear Sophia's breathing and swallowing from far away.

'But still...'

Once the effect wore off, he got a mild headache and a queasy feeling in his stomach.

It was just like a hangover after drinking too much.

'I should only use this as a real trump card.'

Otherwise, the longer the fight went, the more he'd suffer from side effects and his skills would drop.

'Still, until I become a Grandmaster, it's going to be very useful.'

More than anything, his biggest gain was that he could now safely counter Yuria's Heavenly Flow 4th Form.

'Things have been eventful in a lot of ways...'

But at least he was able to figure out how to handle the Heavenly Flow 4th Form before clashing with Yuria again at Sword Dragon Hall.

'Tomorrow really is the day.'

The formal opening of Sword Dragon Hall.

'I'll have to continue to diligently train after entering.'

He hadn't yet absorbed all the aura stored in Vladiark.

There was still about a third remaining.

'If I absorb the rest, I'll probably reach early-stage Swordmaster.'

Ian reached his right hand up toward the ceiling.

— CRACKLE!

Sparks shot out between his fingers.

This was the Thunder Energy he'd gained by breaking through the Master wall with the Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds method—the aura training technique gifted by the Heavenly Sword Lord.

'I need to practice handling Thunder Energy as well.'

He sensed the aura inside his dantian, rumbling and roiling like a thundercloud.

'For now, let's rest.'

He still couldn't sleep, but Ian closed his eyes with the intent to at least meditate.

And at some point, without realizing, he drifted off and greeted the morning sun.

* * *

Next morning.

The opening day of Sword Dragon Hall.

Morning had broken.

"Young Master! Wake up! You don't have time to dawdle!"

"S-Sophia?"

Sophia must have already showered, as her wet hair was wrapped in a towel.

"Today's the first day of training at the Sword Dragon Hall! You have to get ready quickly!"

"I know, but..."

Usually, he was the one waking her up, so it felt strange having Sophia rouse him today.

But, since it was an important day, Sophia's attitude seemed a bit different than usual.

"Young Master! Hurry, hurry!"

"Alright~"

There wasn't much to prepare to go to the Sword Dragon Hall.

If they were moving into a dorm, they'd have to pack a lot, but since Ian and Sophia commuted from Lunabreeze, there was nothing like that.

Just wear the issued student uniform and bring his sword.

"Wow! What perfect weather! What kind of adventure will be waiting now, I wonder! I'm so excited!"

"Yeah. There'll be tough times, but also lots of fun. And you'll grow each time you overcome those."

"Yup! My first goal is to reach Early-stage Aura User!"

Though Sophia had trained hard for two weeks, she still hadn't broken through the beginner level for users.

Realistically, this was the normal rate of growth.

Ian's vertical growth with his unique opportunities and powers just wasn't normal.

"I hope the food is good!"

"..."

Sophia didn't seem worried about anything except the food at Sword Dragon Hall.

"... Isn't there anything else you're concerned about?"

"Not really?"

Having that short conversation while walking, they soon arrived at the Sword Dragon Hall's training ground.

"Oh..."

In the month or so they'd had off, the new students had grown, and now formed little groups around the field.

"Hmm..."

As soon as Ian entered, he felt sharp gazes focused on him.

'They're really staring.'

Most notably, Aris's slave gladiator, barbarian Kuga.

And Hector, second son of the Goldhound family, along with his crew.

Both groups had been thoroughly beaten by Ian during the entrance exam.

'As expected, they're eager for revenge after what happened at the entry test.'

But Kuga and Hector's glares were a bit different.

Kuga's eyes blazed with combative competitiveness, while Hector's dripped with a deep grudge, looking at Ian as if he were a sworn enemy.

'Well, let them do what they want.'

Petty grudges from users were of no concern to Ian, who had already reached Swordmaster level.

'As long as nothing happens to Sophia, it's fine.'

Ian scanned the faces of the other students.

He was looking for Yuria among the crowd.

And then—

'Huh?'

A familiar face almost identical to Yuria's.

'Charlotte?'

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

'Why is she here?'

At age 15, Charlotte should have entered the Sword Dragon Hall a year ahead of Ian, as his senior.

Yet the color of her name badge was the same white as Ian's.

Meaning, she was in the same class.

'What's going on?'

As Ian looked at Charlotte in confusion—

— Swish.

"Young master Ian Greysel?"

"...?"

A tall, lean Heavenly Sword knight approached and spoke to Ian.

"May I ask who you are?"

"Greetings, sir. I am Ophelia, a senior knight of the Heavenly Sword Knights' training division."

"..."

He'd never heard the name before.

"What brings you to me?"

"The Heavenly Sword Lord instructed me to deliver this letter to you, young lord, timed for the opening of the Sword Dragon Hall."

"A-a letter...?"

Again?

"Yes. It's handwritten and unique, so please take care of it."

Another handwritten letter?

"A-alright."

— Bow.

Ophelia bowed and withdrew to one side of the training field.

"The Heavenly Sword Lord sure writes you a lot of letters. Does he have a hobby of writing?"

"... I doubt it."

Or...maybe. Who knows. It just doesn't fit.

He seemed more the type to enjoy extreme sports.

'For now...'

— Thud.

Ian broke the thick seal and checked the letter.

The handwriting was as dense as before, but this time the content was shorter.

To summarize...

— To my dear Ian.

— Charlotte, not yet mature, has made another mistake against you.

— During the entrance exam, she bribed the officiating mage to interfere with you.

— I know you'll be angry, but for my sake, don't hate Charlotte too much.

— She did it to get my attention. She bears no ill will toward you.

— As punishment, Charlotte has been demoted a grade and will train with you from now on.

— Charlotte may be spoiled and prickly, but deep down she's a good child. I hope you take care of her.

— As you spend time together, I'm sure you'll grow closer.

— And perhaps, over time, you may even develop feelings. If you do, you have my full blessing to pursue a relationship. If it's you, Ian, I welcome it with open arms.

— Sorry for laying this burden on you. I will make it up to you when I return from my expedition.

"..."

Ian almost crumpled up the letter on the spot.

"What does it say?"

"... Nothing good..."

"...?"

Why did the Family Head keep trying to match him with his daughters?

Aris was disturbing enough; now even Charlotte...

'I don't want this... I really don't.'

Except for Yuria, the Family Head's daughters were all sworn enemies in his previous life.

'Ugh...'

Ian was now seriously considering making plans to run away with Yuria.

Darkan pushing Ian to have a harem with his daughters...

Chapter 73 : Advances (1)

Advances (1)

The official opening day of the Sword Dragon Hall.

While the new cadets gathered here and there, chatting in small groups in the spacious training grounds...

'That bastard Hector...'

Ian was locking eyes from a distance with Hector Goldhound, who was glaring at him.

'He looks seriously pissed.'

It seemed that the crushing defeat he suffered at Ian's hands during the entrance exam had been a major humiliation.

The eyes of the lackeys standing near Hector also radiated nothing but hostility.

'He's going to pick a fight with me soon enough.'

Hector was a proud man, and he was also despicable enough to use any means necessary to secure victory.

Right now, with so many eyes watching and no proper method to get at Ian, Hector seemed to be behaving himself, but the moment an opportunity arose, he would certainly catch Ian and try to avenge his loss from the entrance test.

'Well... Not that I care if he wants to pick a fight with me.'

Currently, Ian was at the Swordmaster-rank.

It seemed like Hector had grown somewhat stronger since the entrance exam, but even so, his level was still that of a user.

Aura user and Swordmaster.

Like a firefly compared to a full moon.

Their gap in skill was so vast, it was impossible to even compare.

Even if Hector had 200 of himself, he'd never stand a chance against Ian.

However.

'If that bastard finds out about my relationship with Sophia...'

If he realized Sophia was Ian's weakness, Hector would definitely try to exploit her in order to get at Ian.

— Heh.

As if proving Ian's suspicion completely correct.

Hector licked his lips with a sleazy look as he glanced at Sophia standing beside Ian.

'... That bastard??'

A murderous intent surged within Ian for a moment.

How dare he look at Sophia with such filthy eyes?

If there weren't onlookers around, Ian would've broken every limb of his.

'I thought he seemed decent enough during the entrance exam since he was talented...'

But seeing his face now, brimming with such dark malice, made Ian wonder if he'd been useless from the beginning.

"Sophia."

"Yes?"

"Look over there. Those guys huddled in the corner."

Ian pointed at Hector's group with a tilt of his chin.

"Ugh..."

Seeing their stares, Sophia cringed as if she'd been presented with something vile.

"What's their problem? Why are they looking at us with such dirty eyes? ... Wait, this feels familiar..."

She wondered where she'd seen such unpleasant gazes before.

When she'd accompanied Young Master Ian to the vampire ruins gate, there had been five delinquent adventurers picking a fight—these were exactly the same kinds of eyes.

And... those five adventurers, unaware of their place, messed around and were brutally killed by the young master.

"Eek!"

A sudden ominous thought made Sophia flinch and tightly cling to Ian's arm.

"Young Master! No! Hold back!"

"Huh?"

"You can't kill them!"

"Wh-what are you talking about? All of a sudden?"

"They're nobles! If you kill them, there'll be so much trouble! Wouldn't it be better if I just went up and gave those brats a piece of my mind—!"

— Thwap!

Ian flicked Sophia on the forehead.

"Ow!"

"Calm down, Sophia."

"Ugh...! I'm listening even if you just say it! Do you know how much your flicks hurt? It's like being struck by a boulder!"

"You're exaggerating..."

He'd made sure to go easy on her, just a gentle tap.

"Well, let the pain snap you back to your senses. No matter what happens, never go near those guys by yourself. If you ever get involved with them, don't hide anything from me—tell me everything. Got it?"

Sophia rubbed her reddened forehead.

"Ye—yes... I get it... But what about you? A-are you going to kill them?"

"No...? What do you take me for, a serial killer? I'm not going to kill them. What do you take me for?"

"Wh—what do I take you for?! Young Master Ian! In just the past month alone...!"

Sophia cast a discreet glance around before whispering into Ian's ear.

"There are over ten people you've stabbed, beaten, or hacked to death just in this month! So how can you say with a straight face that you're not going to kill anyone?"

"Oh. Really? I guess you're right."

Thinking back, after returning to the past, he'd actually killed quite a lot in just over a month.

In his previous life, he'd taken even more lives in a single day, but for Sophia, this must have been such a sudden change—a string of shocking events—that it made sense for her to be this worried.

"Don't worry. I really don't intend to kill anyone."

Not yet. Not yet, at least.

But who knows about the future?

No matter that Hector was the undisputed number one successor of the Goldhound family. If he kept showing such rotten intentions, Ian would cut him down before he became a bigger disaster.

It would be a hassle to deal with the aftermath, but if he had to, he could kill him anytime.

'Hector. You'd best look at people with kinder eyes. Before I decide to kill you.'

As Ian continued to exchange annoyed gazes with Hector—

— Swish.

"...?"

A huge shadow fell over Ian from behind.

'What's this?'

When he turned, he saw a massive man, well over two meters tall.

It was Kuga, Aris's battle slave Barbarian.

"Ian Greysel."

His voice rumbled like a grinding millstone.

"It's good to meet you. I am Kuga. Warrior."

Kuga extended a hand as large as a cauldron lid for a handshake.

"Uh, O–okay. Nice to meet you."

Ian grasped Kuga's hand.

Kuga shook their hands up and down a couple of times, but when Ian tried to pull away, Kuga held on, not letting go.

"Uh?"

Still holding his hand firmly, Kuga spoke again.

"It was an honor to fight you. Never met a young and strong warrior like you. I like you. Ian Greysel."

"...?"

What was this? Was he... gay?

A cold bead of sweat formed behind Ian's neck.

Kuga continued in awkward Common:

"I want to fight you again. Anytime. I am ready."

"Oh."

So that's what this was about.

Ian got the gist of what Kuga wanted to say.

He'd had plenty of Barbarian comrades in his past life.

Because he understood Barbarian culture to some extent, he could guess what Kuga really meant.

"Sounds good, Kuga. I'd welcome a talented warrior like you as well."

Among Barbarians, many believed that the 'weakness of the weak' was as contagious as a disease.

If a weak person was near them or if they had to fight a weakling, they believed that frailty would rub off on themselves.

Conversely, they also believed that the 'strength of the strong' could have a positive influence on themselves.

Thus, many Barbarian warriors only kept the strong by their side, not even considering the weak as rivals.

Kuga was acknowledging Ian as a strong one, saying he wanted to associate with him.

"Let's have another match when the chance comes."

"Then how about right now—"

"No. Not now."

"A warrior fights anytime, anywhere."

"You have to pick your time and place here, Kuga."

"This land's customs. I do not understand. Nothing is more important than fighting."

"It's kind of like the bathroom. You don't just, uh, do your business anywhere in public here, right?"

"Hmm. I see. Poop goes in the bathroom. So, where does battle go?"

"Later. Later."

"Understood. Then, tell me when the time comes."

"Alright."

"That's enough. Thank you."

Leaving those simple words, Kuga returned to his own place.

"Wow, I was startled! That really scared me!"

As soon as Kuga left, Sophia placed a hand against her chest and let out a sigh of relief.

"I thought that big guy was here to pick a fight too! Why did Barbarians have to evolve such intimidating faces?!"

"You shouldn't make fun of people's faces."

"But... there are limits! He looks so scary!"

"... Honestly, you're not wrong."

Barbarians took great pride in the history written on their faces, so Sophia's comment might not have been disrespectful after all.

"Anyway, Young Master, you sure are popular. Oh! Someone else is coming!"

Sophia pointed over Ian's shoulder.

"Hm?"

When he turned, this time it was a tall boy with fiery red hair and sparkling golden eyes.

It was Kargon Hisperion, the sixth son of the Heavenly Sword family head, walking confidently toward Ian.

"Ian Greysel."

His voice was cold and clear.

"Greetings to Young Master Kargon."

Ian placed his hand over his chest and bowed.

He didn't have any particular connection with Kargon in his past life, but Yuria had said the guy was a good person.

Plus, he was a direct son of the Heavenly Sword family head, Ian's benefactor in this life.

He was certainly worthy of proper respect.

"Ah!"

Sophia, standing beside him, belatedly caught on and awkwardly followed Ian's gesture.

"G–greetings to Young Master Kargon!"

"Ha ha. There's no need to treat me so formally. We're just fellow new cadets now."

"...."

Ian straightened his back again.

Kargon held out his right hand.

"This is our first real greeting as the heir of Greysel. Pleased to meet you."

Ian lightly accepted the handshake.

"I'm honored to meet you too, Young Master Kargon."

"I watched you during the entrance exam. You competed with my sister, who's famous for her God-given talent, and you won splendidly. It was incredibly impressive. Your skill was indescribably excellent."

"You flatter me."

"It's no flattery, actually. I'm rather understating it. If I tried to express my amazement at your skills, I wouldn't finish before nightfall."

"...?"

One of Ian's eyebrows rose involuntarily.

What did this young master want, laying on the compliments this thick?

"Ah. I suppose I'm talking too much. Sorry. Let me get straight to the point."

As soon as Ian showed a peculiar expression, Kargon cut to the chase.

He seemed rather quick-witted.

"I'd like to propose an alliance."

"... An alliance, sir?"

What kind of alliance?

Ian blinked at Kargon.

Kargon nodded and continued.

"There will be many tests at Sword Dragon Hall where teamwork is important. If we help each other then, we can achieve the best results each time."

"... Ah."

Ah. So that's what he meant by alliance.

"Of course, you're skilled enough to get the best results on your own, but I still wanted to make the offer. What do you say? Will you make an alliance with me, based on mutual trust?"

Ian paused a beat before replying.

"I'm sorry, but I can't promise anything right now."

A polite refusal.

Ian didn't know what kind of person Kargon really was.

In his past life, this one hadn't lived long.

He'd died even before the Hisperion civil war started.

If Ian remembered correctly, he died before even graduating the Sword Dragon Hall.

The cultists who attacked the Hall killed him.

Trying to save Yuria.

'Well, that's beside the point right now.'

Ian wanted to spend his Sword Dragon Hall days with Yuria rather than with Kargon.

So he refused.

"Hm. I see."

Kargon smiled ruefully.

Even as a fellow man, the sight of that smile made Ian feel a twinge of protectiveness.

"That's disappointing, but it can't be helped. Still, there'll be a time when we need each other. My offer stands, so let me know anytime."

Ian respectfully bowed his head again.

"Thank you for the offer. I'll keep it in mind."

"No, thank you! If you remember, I'm even more grateful. See you around, then."

Kargon offered a clean farewell and returned to his subordinates.

Ian watched his red-haired figure leave and clicked his tongue quietly.

'He seems like a pretty decent guy.'

Except for Yuria, all the other direct descendants had been enemies in Ian's past life.

If Kargon had survived longer, perhaps they could have become good friends.

'By the way...'

Ian had been looking for Yuria for a while, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"Young Master Ian? Are you looking for someone?"

"Hmm? No, I'm just looking around..."

Just then, as Ian continued to scan the training grounds for Yuria—

"Hm?"

"Eek!"

He caught eyes with Charlotte, who'd been sneaking up on him.

"Huh?"

Ian's face immediately turned grim.

"What do you want????"

"Ee—eep!!?"

Charlotte shrank away, clutching her tattered sleeves and gasping.

It had been about a month since Ian last saw her, since the entrance exam.

— Grimy!

Banished from the palace as punishment, Charlotte clearly looked as though she had endured a month of hardship and poverty.

Seems this Kargon dude is a decent fellow...

Chapter 74 : Advances (2)

Advances (2)

About 30 minutes earlier.

Charlotte was waiting for Ian, leaning against one side of the training hall wall, arms crossed.

— Murmur, murmur!

Cadets bustled around her.

"Gasp! That person over there... Isn't that Lady Charlotte?"

"Huh? Hey. What Lady Charlotte would be dressed so shabbily... Gasp! It's really her!"

"Hmmm? Her name tag is the same white one as ours, though? What's up with that?"

"Isn't it because of the incident with Young Master Ian?"

"Oh. I heard the Heavenly Sword's head scolded her harshly."

"She got thrown out of the annex as punishment."

"Wow, and got her class demoted a whole year, too?"

"She must be having a tough time... It's like she fell at the most important moment."

"Well... It's punishment, after all. Her own fault."

— ZZzt!

Unable to bear it any longer, Charlotte shot them a sharp glare.

"Ugh!"

"Gasp!"

"Ah, ah!"

The cadets who caught her glare stiffened like broken dolls and scattered away like silverfish.

"Tch."

Charlotte clicked her tongue irritably and folded her arms even deeper.

'Fine. Gossip all you want, commoners.'

With her punishment and demotion, Charlotte's situation was in shambles.

'This really was the worst month ever...'

Kicked out of the annex and cut off from her allowance, Charlotte had to earn her own money for a month.

Until the opening ceremony, she couldn't use the dormitory of the Sword Dragon Hall, so for a month she lived in a shabby inn and mainly earned money through the adventurer's guild at the main pavilion.

'To save money, I only ate porridge for the first two days...!'

Thankfully, the knight assigned to watch her, Ophelia, taught her several things, so she managed to survive for a month.

Buying goods at the market, taking quests at the guild, finding a room at an inn—things her servants had always done for her. Having to handle them herself left her overwhelmed.

'I even did labor work alongside commoners...!!!'

She couldn't afford a carriage for hunting or subjugation quests.

Gathering requests required expertise she didn't have.

Delivery requests needed good knowledge of the roads, which she also lacked.

The easiest was cleaning the sewers and repairing the city walls, but since cleaning sewers was impossible for her, she earned her pay working on wall repairs.

Even that was a job she barely managed to get.

Simple labor requests go up at exactly 4 AM and are gone by 4:10.

No matter who she was, the adventurer's guild had no special privileges for Charlotte, so she had to wake up by 3 AM every day to get ready for work.

'My feet ached so much after work...'

Wall repairs required carrying bricks and clay. As a member of Hisperion's bloodline, Charlotte had a superhuman body, so they weren't that heavy, but the foreman, impressed by her strength, assigned an entire section's materials for her to carry.

Thanks to that, she got double pay...

But lugging heavy bricks and clay up and down high walls all day made her soles sore and throb, no matter the Hisperion blessing.

'And I barely got to wash every day, too...'

There was no way such a rundown inn could have bathing facilities that satisfied Charlotte.

She was grossed out by the shared bath and water the commoners used, so she bought a water scoop, hauled up water from a well nearby, and washed herself.

Her whole body felt miserably grimy with dirt and sweat, and washing with cold water never felt truly clean...

'I only had one set of clothes, so I had to wash them by hand every day...'

Scrubbing so hard to remove stains, her cadet uniform soon turned ragged.

'I really suffered...'

But!

'This Charlotte overcame it all!'

Wasn't she the third daughter of the great Heavenly Sword family head?

Adversities of this level–she could overcome them robustly.

Even just last night, she dipped stale bread in watery soup, burst into tears for no reason, cried herself to sleep from exhaustion...

But really, she felt fine today!

Crying yesterday gave her energy!

'Yes... The worst is over.'

Until the Sword Dragon Hall's opening, she couldn't enter the Heavenly Sword Palace or meet Ian.

Now that the pavilion had opened, she could finally meet Ian.

'Hehehe...'

Charlotte took out a neatly folded letter from her bosom.

It was a handwritten letter from the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Summarizing its content:

— To my daughter Charlotte

— I have already given you a stern scolding, so I won't scold you more in this letter.

— But let me say this again. Apologize to Ian sincerely.

— And show this letter to Ian as well.

— Once the Sword Dragon Hall opens, I entrust your future to Ian.

— I will send a separate letter requesting Ian to look after you, so don't fight, and get along.

— If Ian permits, work as a servant in his annex and learn humility.

— If working there, I'll give you a maid's wages as allowance every month via Ophelia.

— Your father sincerely worries about you.

"Hehehe..."

Though the letter was a bit stern, Charlotte caressed the paper and giggled foolishly.

Especially the last line, 'I worry about you,' made her heart feel warm.

'Dad told me to apologize to Ian no matter what...!'

But she had no intention of groveling in a lowly manner.

Instead, she aimed to approach with confidence and dignity.

With the charisma and charm ingrained in her, she would make Ian her own!

'Snagging a mere little boy like Ian is no problem for Charlotte!'

Even without her father's request, Charlotte had to make Ian her ally.

After being kicked out of the annex, demoted at the Sword Dragon Hall, her position was a wreck.

Many supporters had left, and her income stream gone. Supporting even her remaining faction was tough.

To recover, her only option was to make Ian, the era's top talent, her own.

'If I just succeed in making Ian mine...!'

Her father would recognize her again, lost backers would return.

'Hurry and come, Ian Greysel! I'm waiting for you!'

Charlotte stared at the Sword Dragon Hall's large front gate, waiting endlessly for Ian.

Who knew how long she waited.

'There he is!'

Ian appeared at the front gate.

Just as Charlotte was about to approach him—

"Lady, please wait here for a moment."

"Huh?"

Ophelia stopped her and stepped forward.

"What are you doing?"

"I have a letter from the Heavenly Sword Lord to deliver to Young Master Ian."

"Huh? Dad sent a letter to Ian?"

"Yes. I'll deliver it now."

"W-wait!"

Charlotte grabbed Ophelia's cloak.

"Lady?"

"You had the letter Dad sent Ian?! Why didn't you tell me?! L-let me see what's inside before you go!"

"It's sealed, so only Young Master Ian is allowed to open it."

"C-couldn't you open it and reseal it?"

"... That would be deceiving the Lord. Should I report you?"

"A-ah, jeez! So stingy!"

"I'll be back."

"Hmph! So annoying!"

Charlotte fumed, then put a hand on her chest to calm down.

'Still, it's good that Dad left Ian a letter.'

She was disappointed she couldn't check the contents.

No doubt that letter asked Ian to take good care of his pretty third daughter.

'As expected of Dad. Always stern but always thinking of me.'

Maybe this punishment was actually an opportunity handed down by Dad.

A ploy to gift Charlotte the top talent, Ian Greysel.

If he were to connect Ian openly with Charlotte, other factions would accuse him of favoritism.

But in the guise of punishment, he left her with Ian as a 'gift'.

'I'm sure of it. No doubt.'

She'd been caught trying to harm Ian twice, so Ian surely didn't like her.

Or rather, he probably disliked her.

But with her father's letter asking Ian to care for her, Ian couldn't just push her away.

If they spent time together, she could soon charm him.

'I'll have Ian wrapped around my finger in a week!'

At that moment, Ophelia returned to her.

"Ophelia! Did you see what was in the letter?"

"No? Why would I read Young Master Ian's letter?"

"W-what! You should have read it! If I knew the content, I could plan my next move better! You're so unhelpful!"

"I'm only a watcher."

"You never say anything cute! Hmpf!"

"That's probably why they put me with you."

"Hmph! Hmph!"

Charlotte glared at Ophelia before turning her gaze back to Ian.

She was nibbling at her lip, wondering how to approach that calm boy.

"Huh?"

She saw Ian locking eyes fiercely with Hector.

"What's up with them?"

They were staring daggers at each other.

It looked like their relationship was very poor.

'Hmm.'

Charlotte recalled rumors about Hector.

Supposedly, he had huge pride and a fierce temper.

Did he want to hassle Ian because of the entrance exam grudge?

'Hehe. How stupid.'

It reminded her of herself just a month ago.

'That idiot Goldhound.'

Targeting Ian was a fool's game.

Ian was someone to win over, not to keep at a distance!

And she wasn't the only one thinking that.

'Ah.'

Kuga, the giant Barbarian, approached Ian.

'He's...'

Her eldest sister Aris's battle slave.

'Why is he approaching Ian...?'

Soon, Kuga and Ian were smiling warmly and shaking hands.

'T-they seem so close?'

When did they get so friendly?

Charlotte started to feel strangely anxious.

'D-don't tell me...'

Did her eldest sister intentionally send Kuga to approach Ian?

Otherwise, there was no connection between them.

Was Aris also aiming to win over Ian?

No, for someone as cunning as her, it was only natural to target Ian.

'I-I need to hurry...!'

If Aris was targeting Ian, she had to act quickly.

Aris was quick to act, skilled at schemes.

If she hesitated, Ian might be stolen away in the blink of an eye.

'If Ian sides with my eldest sister, all my suffering will be for nothing!'

As she thought this, Kuga returned to his seat.

'Time to approach. My turn!'

Just as Charlotte hurried toward Ian—

"Ian Greysel."

Her younger brother, Kargon, greeted Ian first.

"Huh?"

Charlotte froze in a strange spot.

'Why is he approaching Ian now!?'

Pretending to pace idly, Charlotte pricked up her ears in Ian's direction.

"It's the first time I greet the Greysel heir. Pleased to meet you."

Kargon extended a handshake.

"I'm honored as well, Young Master Kargon."

Ian shook hands.

"I saw you at the entrance exam. You dueled my sister, famed for her natural talent, and won splendidly. You're impressive. Your skill is just extraordinary."

"You flatter me."

"It's no flattery. If anything, I'm understating. If I tried to describe your talent, I couldn't finish today."

"...?"

"Ah, I'm being too chatty. Sorry. Let me get to the point: I'd like to propose an alliance."

"... An alliance?"

"There will be many teamwork-oriented tests at the Sword Dragon Hall. If we help one another, we'll achieve the best results every time."

"... Ah."

"Of course, you have the skill to excel alone, but I wanted to make the offer. Well? Would you consider making an alliance of mutual trust with me?"

Charlotte's eyes narrowed.

'What?!'

No! If they ally, then Ian—! If he allies with anyone, it should be me!

'Turn him down! Reject him, Ian! I'll offer way better terms!'

"I'm sorry. I can't give a definite answer right now."

Sure enough, as Charlotte wished, Ian politely declined.

'That's right!'

Kargon cheerfully said it was a shame, smiled, and returned to his followers.

"Hmph!"

Kargon, that arrogant brat.

He underestimated Ian. Where do you think you're going? Ian's mine!

'No one else will bother him, right?'

No one else seemed to be approaching Ian.

'Now it's really my turn.'

What should she say?

'M-my pride's hurt, but... a proper apology is needed.'

But there was no way she'd grovel.

If she approached in a servile way, even if Ian joined her, it wouldn't mean anything.

If she appeared weak, the hierarchy would crumble and she couldn't keep control.

'I'll make Ian my follower! I can't let him look down on me with some humble act!'

Suddenly, she thought of a good excuse.

'Perfect! I'll tell Ian I was testing him both times! And now that he's passed, I'll support him! Make it sound like I'm giving him a chance!'

Perfect!

Charlotte, after organizing what to say, was about to approach Ian.

"Ah..."

Suddenly, she noticed her shabby clothes.

"U-um..."

She slyly took out a hand mirror from her pocket and looked at her reflection.

Her uncombed hair was frizzy, and recently always washing in cold well water, she might even smell.

'C-can I seduce Ian looking like this...?'

Back in the annex she had been much more dignified and beautiful.

'N-no, be confident!'

I am the third daughter of the illustrious Heavenly Sword Lord!

The whole continent wants me!

No matter what I wear, no matter what state I'm in, my fundamental charm doesn't change!

That's right!

— Chk! Chk! Chk! Chk!

Charlotte gathered her resolve and walked up to Ian.

"U-uh..."

But she still wasn't fully confident, and her steps faltered.

She wanted to approach in her best form if possible.

Should she go back and at least quickly comb her hair?

Did Ophelia have cosmetics? Maybe she could borrow them?

But then she might miss her chance.

If she missed this opportunity, she might not get to talk to him all day.

Would she get a chance tomorrow?

— Hesitate! Hesitate!

Her steps faltered in her swirling emotions.

"Huh?"

Charlotte made eye contact with Ian.

"H-hiek!"

He saw her at her unkempt worst!

"Huh?"

Ian's expression immediately turned grim when their eyes met.

"What are you doing???"

"H-hii!?"

This was completely unexpected.

He smiled warmly at Kuga or Kargon, and even Hector didn't get that look!

Why with her?!

'He's looking at me like I killed his parents!'

It was a look as if he might actually kill her if she spoke to him.

'Y-yes, I did do wrong to him twice, but...! It's not like I did anything deserving that glare!'

Ian's face said he'd kill her if she spoke.

There was no way to start a conversation.

"Tch!"

Ian clicked his tongue and turned away.

"Uh, uhhh..."

Charlotte stood frozen awkwardly.

— Swoosh

A cold breeze swept over her.

'I—I can't give up like this!'

Ian's contempt had startled her, but she couldn't lose her nerve and back off.

If she did, Kargon or Aris might snatch up Ian by tomorrow.

'Tomorrow will be too late!'

So she had to at least talk to him now.

"I—Ian!"

Charlotte shouted.

Ian turned around again.

His face still full of menace.

— Gulp!

Charlotte swallowed dryly and spoke.

"C-could we talk for a minute...?"

His face was too scary.

"C-could we maybe talk... Sir...?"

Afraid to speak informally, she slipped into formal speech.

"Haaa..."

Ian looked at Charlotte and sighed softly.

Normally, he wouldn't have answered her at all, but he'd just gotten a letter from the Heavenly Sword Lord asking him to take care of Charlotte, so he couldn't just ignore her.

'I'd prefer to never be involved with Charlotte...'

But for the head's sake, he'd at least talk.

"What is it you want?"

"S-so... um..."

Charlotte's eyes spun in panic.

W-what did I mean to say?

Something about a test, offering support, an opportunity...

'If I say something like that now...'

He really might hit me!?

But she had nothing else she'd prepared to say, so her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

"Eh, ebb! Dead...!"

"?"

"Gasp!"

Charlotte bit her lip and closed her mouth.

'This isn't good!'

She was always confident in her charm as a woman, but charm was useless in this situation.

'Maybe if I'd gotten dolled up!'

At this rate, she was bound to make a fool of herself. As frustrating as it was, maybe she had to retreat now!?

'N-no! I can't! Retreating now would look weird!'

If she backed off after calling out to him, it'd look really strange.

She'd find it even harder to talk next time.

So she needed to do something now...!

'Oh, right!'

Her father's letter, still in her bosom.

'I'll give this to him! I'll let him know Dad entrusted me to him! That's natural!'

— Chk!

Charlotte bowed 90 degrees and handed Ian the letter with both hands.

"P-please! T-take this!"

She was so flustered, she put too much force into it.

"Ah."

Her voice came out much louder than expected.

— Murmur, murmur.

Because of that, the surrounding crowd's attention focused on them.

"Huh? That's Lady Charlotte."

"What's she doing?"

"A letter? Looks like she's giving Young Master Ian something."

"Delivering a letter on opening day? Is it a love letter?"

"No way... Hmm, maybe, though."

"Lady Charlotte seems so desperate."

"In this context, isn't it only a love letter?"

"W-what, then, gasp! A confession on the first day!? Lady Charlotte is confessing to Young Master Ian!?"

"Unbelievable! What a story! This'll be all over the market square by tonight!"

"Lady Charlotte confessed to Young Master Ian!"

Charlotte's ears twitched.

"What?"

I don't like the Charlotte angle....

【(ᗢ_ᗢ)】

Chapter 75 : Advances (3)

Advances (3)

"Ha!?"

"Miss Charlotte is confessing to Young master Ian!?"

A great torch had been thrown into the powder keg hearts of pubescent boys and girls, who were all immensely interested in romance.

"What!? Seriously!?"

"No way! Where!? Quick! Let's go see it right now!"

"We can't miss something like this!"

"That way! That way!"

Interest spread with the speed and intensity of a wildfire, leaping from person to person.

— Rumble!-

In an instant, a crowd of new trainees circled Ian and Charlotte, surrounding them like a solid wall.

"W-What!"

Charlotte, who hadn't intended to attract any attention, spun around in a panic, unable to hide her confusion.

"Wh-what is this...? N-no!"

Trainees pressed in from all directions—front, back, sides—packed so tightly there was hardly space to breathe.

And the crowd just kept growing behind them.

"N-no, this isn't right...!"

How did the situation suddenly end up like this?!

All I wanted was to hand Ian a letter from Father!

"Miss Charlotte! Hang in there!"

"Be brave! Waaah!"

"Confess! Confess! Confess!"

"W-What!"

On top of all this? A confession?

"T-That's not it! Y-You guys! It's a misunderstanding! T-this is just...!"

"Confess! Confess! Confess!"

"Accept! Accept! Accept!"

"U-Urgh...!"

The collective frenzy of the crowd blazed hotter and hotter, unified as one.

"Th-this is insane...!"

There was simply no way to talk sense to them.

'These kids...! They completely believe their own misunderstanding is the truth!'

Or perhaps, from the beginning, they didn't care about the truth at all.

They were just thrilled to have something entertaining to witness!

"Stop! Stop it!"

Charlotte shouted until her face turned scarlet.

"Confess! Confess! Confess!"

"Accept! Accept! Accept!"

Yet the chanting showed no sign of stopping.

"So cute, miss Charlotte!"

"Hang in there!"

In fact, her flushed face only seemed to excite them more, and their cheering intensified.

"How, how rude!! You all... really!!!"

Even if it was just meant as encouragement, for direct descendants like Charlotte to be made a spectacle out of was incredibly disrespectful.

And to top it off, the commotion was all sparked by a huge misunderstanding.

But this was Black Dragon Hall—immaturity here was hardly unusual.

Most were just fourteen-year-old children; as soon as one or two kids crossed the line, others would get carried away and join in.

"Confess! Confess! Confess!"

"Accept! Accept! Accept!"

"Her face is going to explode!"

"Ian Greysel! What are you doing!? Hurry up and accept!"

"So cute, miss Charlotte!"

"Ah, ahwahwahwah...!"

Charlotte's eyes spun frantically, like a broken machine.

Her whole body was now as red as a ripe apple, from face to toe.

'Honestly...'

Ian sighed quietly amidst the trainees' cheers.

"Confess! Confess! Confess!"

"Accept! Accept! Accept!"

'Charlotte's confessing to me? That's ridiculous.'

The trainees were mistaken and chanting wildly, but Ian didn't buy into their misunderstanding even for a second.

Charlotte was proud and had high standards.

This was the first time they'd even come face-to-face in this life.

There was never any reason for Charlotte to like Ian, nor was she the type to confess her feelings first—even if she did like someone.

'Then that letter...'

Looking closely at the letter in her hands, he noticed the Heavenly Sword Lord's seal.

'A letter from the Heavenly Sword Lord...?'

Was there another letter from the Heavenly Sword Lord addressed to me?

He wouldn't know for sure until he received it.

But one thing was certain: it was definitely not a love letter.

'Ha... Charlotte. What on earth is this.'

If it was something important, she should have handed it over somewhere quiet and private.

If you desperately hand it over in front of such a large crowd, of course, everyone's going to notice.

"Confess! Confess! Confess!"

"Accept! Accept! Accept!"

'Well, still...'

It was noisy and a bit embarrassing, but it was just a bunch of kids playing around.

The misunderstanding could be cleared up later; as time passed, things would quiet down on their own, so there was nothing to worry about.

He was being teased, but it was harmless.

And really, what was wrong with letting kids get excited and enjoy their youth? It would be a fond memory for them.

Since nearly all the trainees here were just young boys and girls, it was only natural for them to gossip and enjoy things like this.

However—

"Ah, ahwahwahwahwah!!"

Charlotte was trembling visibly, on the verge of hyperventilating.

Her entire body had turned bright red with embarrassment, as if she didn't know what to do.

'Haaa.'

Even though Charlotte had betrayed Yuria in her previous life and already tried twice to harm Ian in this one...

She was still the daughter of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

He had just received a letter from the Heavenly Sword Lord asking him to take care of her, so he couldn't simply leave her in this predicament.

"Confess! Confess! Confess!"

"Accept! Accept! Accept!"

Suddenly, in the midst of the chanting, a deep voice stood out clearly.

"Fight! Fight! Fight!"

Ian turned to see Barbarian Kuga pumping his fists and chanting with the other trainees.

"..."

Why is he joining in?

Does he even understand what's happening right now?

'What should I do...'

The only way to calm them down would be to shout using enhanced energy or scare them a bit.

But he didn't want to intimidate the kids over something so trivial.

And it was the first day of the hall's opening, too. He didn't want to make a violent first impression.

'Still, I can't just stand here and do nothing.'

To resolve it quickly, the best move was to just take the letter.

"Confess! Confess! Confess!"

"Accept! Accept! Accept!"

The chanting continued, loud and unceasing.

Ian approached Charlotte and held out his hand.

"Please. The letter."

"Uh, uh!?"

Charlotte clutched the letter to her chest, shaking her head.

"A-ahwah! W-wait! This, this is...! You're all misunderstanding! Something's wrong here!"

Charlotte, who had been speaking formally, suddenly slipped into informal speech.

But Ian kept his hand extended, pointing to the letter.

"I know what it is. That letter. Isn't it from the Heavenly Sword Lord, addressed to me?"

"O-oh? H-how did you know?"

"There's the Lord's seal on it."

"Ah! I see!"

Charlotte was so flustered she missed something that obvious.

"But I can't give it to you! At least, not now!"

"... Pardon?"

Ian's face involuntarily twisted at the prospect of unnecessary hassle.

"H-hic!"

Charlotte gasped so sharply that it almost sounded pitiful.

"E-even if you frown...! I-I can't hand it over now, because if I do, the others will keep misunderstanding...! I want to clear up the misunderstanding first...!"

"..."

Normally, Ian would have left at the first sign she wouldn't hand over the letter.

But since the Heavenly Sword Lord had asked him to look after Charlotte, he couldn't do that.

"It's impossible to clear up their misunderstanding right now. Would they even listen to reason at this point?"

"Now's your chance, miss Charlotte!"

"Be brave!"

"Give him the letter! Give him the letter!"

"Accept! Accept! Accept!"

This was truly a scene of collective frenzy.

Short of scaring them all off, nothing he said would get through.

No matter what explanation he gave, they'd just take it as embarrassing excuse-making.

"Honestly, it would be best to just leave now, and work on clearing up the misunderstanding bit by bit."

Trying to correct the misunderstanding immediately was hopeless.

It would be better to quietly let the heat die down, then tell one or two of the more talkative ones the truth to set things straight.

They would then spread the word and clear up the misunderstanding for everyone else.

Of course, there might still be some who refused to believe it, but that couldn't be helped.

Such a minor misunderstanding wouldn't hinder Ian's path at all, so it really didn't matter.

And it was already too late to take anything back.

"... I-I-I see!"

Charlotte hesitated.

But quickly nodded.

"A-all right... then...!"

Given how chaotic things were right now, thinking things through seemed impossible for her, so she just decided to follow Ian's lead.

— Swish.

With both hands, Charlotte held out the letter.

Ian slowly accepted it from her.

"Waaahhhh!!!"

Thunderous cheers erupted from the trainees.

"What's all this noise!?"

Soon, the commotion drew instructors and assistants out from the school building.

"What are you all doing!?"

The instructors scolded the trainees and dispersed the crowd.

"What happened here?"

The senior instructor, standing in the midst of the crowd, asked Ian and Charlotte for an explanation.

Ian explained that there had been a misunderstanding while Charlotte was handing him a letter from the Heavenly Sword Lord.

"I see... I understand... In any case, this must have been quite a surprise."

The instructor wiped his face with a troubled expression, then continued.

"Young master Ian and Miss Charlotte, you're not at fault, but the opening ceremony is about to start. Please refrain from drawing such attention beforehand."

"U-uuuu...!"

Charlotte gripped the hem of her pants, on the verge of crying, her lips pushed out and trembling like a sparrow's beak.

"..."

Ian considered patting her on the back for comfort, but reconsidered.

"Don't worry. The misunderstanding will be cleared up soon."

"R-really...?"

"Yes. I'll handle it, so don't worry."

"U-uuu... Sorry... And thank y—..."

Charlotte mumbled something, but Ian turned away without hearing her.

He needed to go somewhere quiet and check the letter sent by the Heavenly Sword Lord.

* * *

Ian moved behind the school building, away from the training grounds.

Most of the trainees were gathered together at the training grounds, so there was no one around here.

"P-pfft! Hehehe! Kekekeke!"

"Sophia... you..."

Sophia was laughing mischievously.

"A-ahaha! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Pfft! Whew... I'm sure you were in a tough spot too, Young Master, but the look on that blondie's face when she panicked was just too funny...! Kekekek!"

Sophia knew that Charlotte had already tried to harm Ian twice.

First, she sent an assassin to Ian's detached house to steal his Vladiark. Then, at the entrance exam, she bribed the supervising mage to ensure Ian failed early.

So Sophia hadn't had a good impression of Charlotte, and seeing her flustered today seemed to have lifted her spirits.

"... Hahaha."

That infectious laughter made Ian let out a chuckle as well.

Sophia could only laugh like this because she knew Ian didn't take the incident too seriously.

"Well, let's check the letter."

There was no one here to interfere or make a fuss.

"Let me see too, Young Master!"

"Go ahead."

Sophia pressed her head against Ian's temple.

Just as they were about to open the letter together—

"Ian Greysel!"

"Hmm?"

A clear voice called from behind, making Ian fold the letter back up.

"Miss Yuria?"

"Hmph!"

Turning around, he saw Yuria approaching, fists clenched and her brow furrowed in anger.

With sharp eyes, she strode toward Ian.

— Zap!-

Then she glared daggers at Sophia.

"Eep...!"

Sophia instinctively took two steps away from Ian.

Chapter 76 : Advances (4)

Advances (4)

— Zzzt!

Yuria glared fiercely at Sophia with eyes full of anger.

"Eh...!"

Sophia flinched at that gaze and instinctively took a step back, but as Yuria's eyes relentlessly followed her, she froze in place, not knowing what to do.

"...?"

Ian was no less bewildered.

Why is Yuria so angry?

— Swish.

Ian led Sophia behind his back and took Yuria's burning gaze in her stead.

"Miss Yuria?"

Only then did Yuria avert her eyes from Sophia and look into Ian's.

"It's been almost two weeks. Ian Greysel."

Yuria pursed her lips, clearly displeased about something.

"Hmph... This trickster...!"

It was muttered quietly, but it rang clear in Ian's ears.

"Eh...?"

What's this?

What on earth is she so angry about?

— Snap!

Yuria folded her arms and shot another glance at Sophia.

"Who is this woman?"

"Hmm."

The way Yuria kept glaring at Sophia made it seem like she had a grudge against her.

'Did Sophia ever do anything to Yuria? No, that can't be. They've never even met alone back at Heavenly Sword Palace.'

'Still, since she asked, I should introduce them.'

"I'll introduce her. This is Sophia Marygold. She's my most trusted childhood friend."

Ian smiled reassuringly at Sophia as if to tell her not to be nervous, then brought her to his side.

"Ah..."

"Greet her, Sophia."

With a nod from Ian, Sophia nervously watched Yuria and gave a formal greeting.

"Ah, hello, miss Yuria...! It's an honor to meet you...!"

Though flustered, it was a proper greeting in line with Heavenly Sword Palace etiquette.

"I am Sophia, surname Marygold..."

However—

"Noble?"

Yuria cut off Sophia before she could finish.

"Ah. I-I'm actually..."

Ian stepped in for the flustered Sophia.

"My friend doesn't hold a noble title yet."

"Hm... Is that so?"

Yuria fixed a cold gaze on Ian.

"You're really funny."

"... Sorry?"

Ian blinked, confused.

"So you're saying this woman isn't family, nor a retainer."

"Th-that's right."

"Not a noble either."

"Yes."

"Then she's a commoner with no relation to you."

"Ah. Sophia once worked for our main family. We became close then."

"... What? And she was a servant? Then she wasn't even a swordswoman."

"She is a swordswoman now."

"... You. Sophia, was it?"

Yuria eyed Sophia again.

"How old are you?"

"T-this year, I'm 16, miss."

"What's your aura level?"

"Just starting at the beginner level..."

"What? Just started? And your swordsmanship? Your experience?"

"T-that is..."

With the relentless questioning, Sophia's lips grew dry.

She hadn't actually done anything wrong, yet Yuria's sharp gaze made her worried she must have unknowingly made a mistake.

"I-it's just been a little over a month..."

"Hah! A month?"

Yuria looked at Ian, incredulous.

"You brought someone who's only been wielding a sword for a month to Sword Dragon Hall? Ian, did you bring her personally?"

"... Yes, but is that a problem?"

"Ha. Problem?"

Yuria cocked her head, glaring at Ian.

'What is this, Ian Greysel? What are you trying to pull with me?'

If he brought this girl here himself, who was neither family nor retainer nor a proper swordswoman...

Doesn't this just mean she's a girlfriend?

So there was another woman besides me?

"Then what about the things you showed me two weeks ago in the west?"

He had revealed all the strength he'd hidden to save her from Dellen.

He had shielded her with his own body, even catching Dellen's blade in his chest.

He'd even let her have time for a final farewell, rather than finish Dellen off instantly.

While camping during their escape, he'd told her he wished she'd grow stronger.

When she doubted his sincerity, he'd proven it with an oath on mana.

And then, he'd lovingly treated the wound on her hand, saying even a small scar could itch.

After all that sacrifice, the only thing Ian asked in return was...

No arm-in-arm or handholding with other boys—that was his only request.

Making such an innocent request and blushing up to his ears...

'What was that?! Was I imagining everything by myself?!'

While recovering in the Heavenly Sword Palace, Yuria had spent two weeks wondering about the meaning behind Ian's actions.

The kindness, the sacrifice, the sincerity, the small favors.

Again and again, she'd reached the same conclusion:

Ian certainly seemed to genuinely like her.

She had even thought that if things went well, she might try getting closer to him herself.

But now...

'How dare...!'

She'd even readied her heart for him! And here he was laughing with another woman?!

And what are these two to each other anyway?!

Not family, not a retainer, but what? Friends?

How can a man and a woman be just friends?

Anyone can see they're together!

Ian Greysel! You womanizer! Player!

"Hmph!"

Yuria snorted.

'Ah...! I'm so angry...!'

She was furious at herself for having spent two weeks alone, anticipating things about Ian.

But Ian and Yuria had never defined their relationship.

If they had mutually agreed to date, or had been openly honest about their feelings, maybe she would have called him out.

But right now...

Honestly, the relationship was too ambiguous for her to even get angry.

That made her even more frustrated.

'Do you know how much I've been thinking of you for two weeks...!'

She had imagined all sorts of situations with him, thought about what to say and do!

It was all such foolish nonsense!

Why did he say those things to me when he really had another girlfriend the whole time?!

Why did he risk his life for me, treat me so kindly, blush so cutely?!

— Crackling!

Yuria glared at Sophia, her eyes blazing.

"Eep...!"

Sophia tightly pressed her lips together and lowered her eyes.

Yuria's gaze deepened.

'She's pretty...'

Not flashy, but with a calming beauty about her that put people at ease.

A girl with a warm and gentle charm that Yuria herself lacked.

'Was this Ian Greysel's type?!'

She was the complete opposite of Yuria!

Unexplained anger continued to well inside Yuria.

"Huu, huu..."

But no matter how upset, there was no point lashing out.

Yuria took a deep breath to calm her heated anger.

Instead of getting angry now, there was a question she had to ask, even if it was a little embarrassing.

"Are you two dating?"

"Eh!"

Sophia, startled by the question, flailed her hands and bit her tongue.

"Ah! H-how could I ever! There's no way! We're not dating!"

"... Really?"

At that, Yuria's fierce expression unconsciously eased a little.

'So they're not dating?'

Well, then.

Yuria tilted her chin.

'That girl knows her place, at least.'

Ian was a young master of a prestigious family even in Hisperion, and a genius with Heavenly Extreme talent—surpassing even Yuria, who was called a prodigy.

There was no way someone like Ian would date a lowly commoner. It just wouldn't happen.

He might fool around a bit if he were a true womanizer, but a serious relationship was out of the question.

To be involved with someone like Ian, you'd need the right background and the talent to match him.

For example, someone like... herself, Yuria, would be a perfect match.

'Hmm... But.'

Not in a relationship?

Then what are they? They looked really close just now.

Standing right next to each other, even their faces touching!

'Ah...! Now that I think about it!'

This girl! She looked familiar—she was at the Sword Selection Ceremony too.

Right before the ceremony, in the corridor to the Sword Pool, she had come running to wipe away Ian's tears after he saw Yuria and cried.

'He brought her to the Sword Selection Ceremony too? No matter how I think about it, it still looks like they're together.'

Just childhood friends? Really?

'Hmm... Are they really just friends? Ah, but wait! Aren't they living together at the guest annex now?! And they're not dating?! What is going on?!'

Yuria bit down hard on her lower lip.

She had so many things she wanted to ask right now.

'Ugh...!'

But her mouth wouldn't open that easily.

She and Ian weren't in any official relationship after all.

If she asked anything more, she'd seem nosy.

She was upset, but she didn't want to risk crossing a line and being disliked.

'Maybe I was just imagining Ian liked me in the first place...'

If she pried any further, it would definitely look strange.

'Ha... Well, nothing I can do about it. I'll just have to be patient and find out more little by little.'

Even after she'd come to that decision, Yuria's eyes remained fixed on Sophia.

— Drip, drip!

Sophia, feeling the glare, could do nothing but sweat nervously.

"Miss Yuria?"

Not able to stand it any longer, Ian cautiously spoke up.

"Sophia is like a sister to me. If there is anything that upsets you, I ask you to please speak to me directly."

As Ian sided with Sophia, Yuria's eyes grew even more menacing.

"Ugh...!"

A sister between man and woman? Did you even perform a ceremony or something?

'But at least I know this!'

This Ian Greysel—he's got complicated relationships with women.

"Huu...!"

Yuria sighed.

A deep breath calmed her emotions just a bit.

'Well, I guess it's inevitable.'

Yuria looked at Ian with slightly softer eyes.

'With looks like his... such skill, good personality, willing to put himself on the line for others... He really shakes people's hearts...'

If Ian had been as kind to other girls as he was to her in the west—

It wouldn't be strange if women gathered around him.

'True...'

If anything, it was strange there was only one brown-haired girl around him.

'Well... but at least they're really not dating, right?'

Maybe they're just... really, really close.

He did say like siblings.

'I'll have to keep watching closely to find out.'

She honestly still didn't know what kind of feelings Ian had for her.

She thought he liked her, but now she was confused again.

If Ian really did like her—

'I have absolutely no intention of being just one of many girlfriends to a womanizer.'

If Ian wanted her, it had to be an exclusive relationship.

'There can't be any other girls. If he wants me, he'll have to sort things out with that girl once and for all.'

Of course, if Ian had absolutely no interest in her, she'd be embarrassed to have even had such thoughts.

'Ugh...!'

Suddenly.

Perhaps the reason she was so angry was not because of Ian, but because she wanted him herself—so whispered a thought in her mind.

'Ugh...! So humiliating!'

Whether it was anger or embarrassment, Yuria's cheeks flushed slightly as she chewed on her lower lip.

"By the way, miss."

Ian glanced at the leather watch strapped to his wrist.

The inauguration ceremony was about to start.

"Why did you come looking for me?"

Since she'd followed him to such an out-of-the-way spot, there must be an important reason.

He needed to hear why she sought him out before the ceremony began.

"I-it was just to say hi!"

Yuria clumsily lied.

In truth, she'd gotten angry seeing Ian and Sophia heading somewhere secluded and had followed them, but...

"Ah!"

Now that she thought of it, there was one more thing to check.

"What did Charlotte give you earlier? The others made a fuss, saying it was a love letter, but there's no way."

That couldn't be a love letter.

It's not that she doubted Charlotte might like Ian.

He was from a good family, capable, handsome, and had a great personality—someone even with Charlotte's high standards might approve of.

But Charlotte was the type who, no matter how much she liked someone, would never confess first because of her enormous pride.

"It was a letter the Heavenly Sword Lord left for both Miss Charlotte and me. Miss Charlotte read it first and handed it to me."

"Ah. I knew it."

Of course.

There was no way it was a love letter.

"Well, fine. Get back to your business."

"... Is that all you came for?"

"Y-yes, that's it! Checking in, saying hi, or whatever. What else would I be here for?"

Yuria feigned ignorance again.

Ian nodded with a gentle smile.

"I see. Actually, I've been looking for you all this time."

"H-huh? Looking for me?"

"Yes. I hadn't seen you at all since we returned from the west. I was worried if you'd been hurt further, or if you were healing well."

"W-what..."

"I'm glad to see you well again. It's a great relief."

"Ugh!"

At the word 'relief,' Yuria's cheeks turned impossibly red.

Even though her anger hadn't fully dissipated, hearing those words with that smile felt like a wave washing away a rock; her anger was instantly colored over with excitement.

"And I missed you."

Yuria's eyes wavered, and her face turned even brighter red.

"I-I see? Y-you missed me? Hmph! I, I thought about you sometimes too... N-no! You look fine, so that's good! I checked, so I'll be going!"

"Yes. Take care on your way. I'll see you again at the ceremony."

"Y-yeah! Okay! Tell me if anything comes up! Okay!"

Yuria spat out her words in rapid-fire, yanked her hood down to hide her red face, and hurried away.

"Hmmm?"

After all was said and done, Sophia, who'd been quietly watching, tilted her head.

"Miss Yuria likes you, doesn't she, young master?"

Ian shook his head.

"No way. That can't be."

But I'll make it so for sure.

Yuria is jealous, and Ian is oblivious...

Go figure...

Chapter 77 : Advances (5)

Advances (5)

The opening ceremony was about to begin.

The new cadets gathered below the platform at the training grounds according to the instructors' directions.

'Haa.....'

Ian, standing near the middle of the cadet ranks, rubbed his temples with a deep sigh.

'Asking me to let Charlotte stay in my annex.....?'

Ian had just finished reading a letter he had received from Charlotte.

The letter contained various matters, but……

- Once the Sword Dragon Hall opens, I will entrust your affairs to Ian afterward.

- If Ian permits, serve as a maid in his annex and learn to temper your arrogance.

Because of these two lines, the rest of the content evaporated from his mind.

'Entrusting Charlotte's affairs to me……. And telling me to make her serve as a maid in the annex……?'

What a bolt out of the blue.

He disliked it. It was bothersome.

He was being asked to make that arrogant, foul-tempered, domineering, self-centered girl do housework.

As if that were an easy thing to do.

It was obvious she wouldn't listen, so just thinking about it made his vision darken.

However……

'…… Tsk. This isn't about what I like or dislike.'

The letter did state 'if Ian permits', but that wasn't the important part at all.

'What matters is that the Heavenly Sword Lord personally entrusted Charlotte to me.'

While he was away from the palace due to an expedition, he was asking Ian to look after his daughter Charlotte.

That was the only thing that truly mattered.

'This is an unrefusable request.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord was Ian's benefactor.

Thanks to him, he was able to live safely with Sophia in Lunabreeze, and Ian also received incredibly valuable gifts like the Heavenly Blood Band, Flostilla, Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds, a subspace artifact, and so forth.

He could freely use facilities like the alchemy workshop or the medical center in the Heavenly Sword Palace without any restrictions.

What's more, even though she was in a position to command him by force, she had taken the trouble to write several handwritten letters herself to entrust Charlotte to him.

How could Ian possibly refuse such a benefactor's polite and earnest request?

'All I can do is fulfill it with a sense of responsibility.'

Ian's gaze deepened.

Honestly, he wasn't sure if he could do it well.

Would Charlotte even listen to him in the first place?

It would be fortunate if she didn't just act high-handed and push all her work onto him.

'Still, I should try my best.'

The Heavenly Sword Lord hoped that Charlotte could learn to temper her arrogance by serving as a maid in Ian's annex.

By having her personally do the menial chores she used to look down on, it would teach her humility—that there is no work in the world so easy as to be looked down on—and allow her to develop consideration for others' labor and the caution to recognize she can be wrong.

'Well..... I don't know how it'll turn out, but since the Heavenly Sword Lord entrusted her to me, I should give it my all.'

The process would by no means be easy.

Changing someone's character is terribly difficult—virtually impossible, in fact.

It takes years for someone to change their own temperament, let alone for someone else to do it.

Moreover, Charlotte was more prideful than anyone.

The odds that she would listen to Ian, who was a year younger than herself, were slim.

'Still, this is the task given to me by the Heavenly Sword Lord..... I have to do it, even if it's difficult.'

He had never tutored anyone in his previous life, but as a swordsmanship instructor, he did have plenty of experience training cadets.

'I'll make the best use of those experiences, using both the carrot and the stick.'

However, he wouldn't develop any personal feelings toward Charlotte.

Charlotte had betrayed Yuria in his previous life and had already schemed against Ian twice in this one—a real troublemaker.

She was not someone he would benefit from getting close to.

For now, since the Heavenly Sword Lord had entrusted her to him, all he could do was do his best.

'Until the Heavenly Sword Lord returns..... I hope Charlotte can at least learn to consider others.'

That was enough thinking about Charlotte.

When he reached this conclusion—

- Bwuuuuuuuu!

A grand horn sounded.

"The Sword Dragon Hall Master is entering! All cadets──! Attention!"

The instructor in charge of the ceremony announced the entrance of the Sword Dragon Hall Master.

'The Sword Dragon Hall Master.....'

Ian bit his lower lip and looked up at the platform.

— Kugugugugugu!

The huge gate behind the platform, leading to the instructor's area, began to open with a heavy rumble.

Soon, the Master would emerge from within.

'In my previous life, I'd only heard the name.'

Maegor Hisperion, Sword Dragon Hall Master.

A grandmaster of a collateral line and quite influential within Hisperion as a member of the Elder Council.

By all accounts, he was an old man with a gleaming bald head and long, sleek, sage-like beard.

'I wonder what kind of person he is.....'

It was always interesting to see powerful people firsthand.

Ian looked up at the long stairway behind the platform with keen interest.

Soon, a slender figure appeared from the massive gates at the top of the stairs.

"......?"

He couldn't clearly see the face due to the dazzling sunlight.

However—

'That's... not a bald head?'

It was immediately obvious there was no bald head.

Instead of a gleaming scalp, what appeared was a head of beautiful, silky platinum hair.

"..... Huh?"

Below that, a pair of burning, red eyes wavered like glowing embers.

And lips smiling even more brilliantly than sunlight.

"W-what.....!"

A shocked outcry escaped from Ian's throat before he realized it.

'Ah, it's Aris!'

The eldest daughter—third child—of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

A lunatic, a hypocrite, a villainess, a black widow.

Where had the Sword Dragon Hall Master that Ian knew gone? Aris was now descending the platform in his place.

'That, that woman.....!'

Why was Aris at the opening ceremony……?

She should have been frantically busy purging the Theo faction and securing that vacant power.

'And why isn't the Sword Dragon Hall Master present……! Why is Aris descending in his stead!'

— Tok. Tok.

Each step Aris took down the stairs made Ian's heart pound.

'No way…….'

A chilling premonition ran from the crown of his head to his toes.

'It can't be……. Can it?'

Ian struggled to dismiss the intuition darting through his mind.

There was no way Aris had come here as the Sword Dragon Hall Master.

No way. Unthinkable.

'She must be acting as a deputy for the Hall Master. Or maybe as a deputy for the Heavenly Sword Lord. With the expedition underway and the purge of the Theo faction, it's an especially chaotic time…….'

Besides, Aris had no reason to take the position of Sword Dragon Hall Master.

There was nothing for her to gain in that post.

It was a role laden with both heavy duties and endless obligations.

And Aris, as one of the strongest heirs to the clan, was incredibly busy.

She had no reason to shut herself in the Sword Dragon Hall and train juniors.

'Yeah……. She must be here to oversee the ceremony for a short while.'

He clung to that faint hope.

However—

— Tok.

Aris slowly ascended the rostrum.

"All cadets──! Salute the Sword Dragon Hall Master!"

At the same time, the instructor's shout struck Ian's mind like a hammer.

— Hea! Ven! Sword!

A mighty salute reverberated from the new cadets.

'No.....'

Though all the cadets were placing their hands over their chests and saluting, Ian alone stood frozen, unable to move.

"....."

He could only stare up at Aris standing above, stiff as a stone.

'This can't be.....!'

Aris was still smiling serenely on the platform.

To some, that smile would seem warm and beautiful, but to Ian, it was nothing but ominous and terrifying.

— Swish.

Soon enough, Aris's red eyes found the gray-haired boy amidst the cadets.

[It's been a while, young master Ian.]

"....."

As soon as their eyes met, Aris whispered to him via aura message.

— Smirking.

Her radiant smile bent even deeper.

[You look very flustered. You didn't even salute with the others. Are you nervous?]

"....."

Only then did Ian realize he hadn't saluted.

His fingers twitched, but he didn't bother to salute belatedly.

As Ian continued to look up at Aris with a grave expression, she licked her upper lip.

[You look really serious. 'Why has this woman suddenly shown up here? What is she plotting, coming to take the Hall Master's seat?' It's exactly that kind of expression.]

"……!"

Ian's cheeks flinched at her precise guess.

[You know what kind of person I am, don't you?]

"……."

[I was curious. How did you sense my true nature from our first meeting? And your strange talents, the inexplicable abilities you showed in the West. I want to know about all of them—every last secret.]

"……."

The crowd waited for Aris to begin her speech, but Aris looked only at Ian, as if there was nothing else in this place but him, again whispering through aura messages.

[That's why I came here. Because of you.]

Hearing that, goosebumps prickled all across Ian's body.

'Damn…….'

Ian clenched his jaws.

He'd wanted above all to avoid getting entangled with Aris in this life.

But odd incidents had piled up one by one, and before he realized it, he'd properly caught Aris's attention at the worst possible moment.

[It's unfair, don't you think? You seem to know all about me, but I know nothing about you.]

Aris's lips curved into a long smile.

The cadets, seeing that smile, blushed slightly, but Ian's face turned even more severe.

[So I decided to become your teacher. I'll instruct and raise you, so I can gradually learn more about you. Consider it just self-defense, yes?]

With the air of someone savoring a delicious dish, Aris licked her lips again.

[Ian Greysel. From now on, I'll take special care to guide you. You'd best not hide anything from me anymore.]

— Crack!

His clenched teeth ground together.

'..... I'm thoroughly caught.'

Aris, still standing silent and elegant on the platform, never took her eyes off Ian.

Her smile glittered in the sunlight, flawless and beautiful, but in those eyes, the burning obsession was clear as day.

'..... If I'm not totally on guard, this could go really bad.'

Looking back, there were more than a few reasons why Aris might have become interested in him.

Utterly defeating Yuria—said to be a genius without equal—in the entrance exam.

Putting up an iron wall against Aris from their first meeting in Lunabreeze.

From the moment he entered Morbeng village in the west, everything had been exposed to Aris.....

'No, but still.....'

Even so... as much as he'd revealed, would she really go so far as to take the Hall Master's seat herself, just to keep him close under observation?

'She's always impossible to predict.'

What Aris would do next unsettled him most.

No matter how much Ian was favored by the Heavenly Sword Lord, Aris was the type who couldn't care less about that.

She would watch him silently, then, if she saw something she wanted to take, she'd just take it—and if she felt like harassing him on a whim, she'd do so without a second thought. She was a true lunatic.

'Aris is as wicked as any Grand Duke of the Demon Realm.'

— Hoo.....

Ian exhaled deeply, locking gazes with Aris.

He steadied his wavering eyes, calming his agitation.

Soon, resolute determination filled Ian's gaze.

[Oh my.]

Aris's eyes widened a little.

When the nervous, frozen boy's gaze settled into calm resolve with a deep breath, her red eyes sparkled with interest.

Ian didn't look away, clenching his fist tightly.

'In any case..... Seems like fate just won't let me have even a moment's peace.'

Truthfully, he'd grown a bit complacent when he reached the level of Swordmaster at just fourteen.

But—

'With Aris targeting me like this, there's no time for leisure. I have to reclaim my former life's level, even a second faster.'

Aris's level was Grandmaster.

A supreme rank even Ian had never reached in his former life.

But that didn't mean she was an utterly invincible opponent.

'As long as I can reach the peak of Swordmaster as I did in my previous life... I won't be pushed around unilaterally by Aris.'

Ian had a history of defeating Grandmasters several times at the peak-stage Swordmaster even in his previous life.

Now, with the Authority of Projection, Vladiark, and far more advanced swordsmanship, his chances should be even better.

'But until I regain my past level, it's as if I'm standing naked and unguarded. I need to stay sharp and reclaim my former strength as quickly as possible.'

Along with regaining his aura level, he needed to train his body even tougher than before, and recover the swords he had used in his previous life as soon as possible.

For now, the closest, tangible goal was the twice-yearly final assessments.

The awards granted to the top student in those assessments.

He had to claim every single one of them.

'But until I reach the peak of Swordmaster, I need to act with utmost caution.'

Ideally, Aris would lose all interest in him, but it was likely too late for that now.

Ian had already shown Aris far too much.

Especially by demonstrating strange abilities and ultimately defeating Dellen, a Swordmaster, he had given the most decisive reason.

At this point, if he tried hiding his strength clumsily, she'd just assume he was faking weakness.

Then, who knew what Aris might do to force him to reveal his true skills.

She might even kidnap people precious to Ian to provoke him.

'Given the situation, it'll be better to reveal my power gradually, bit by bit.'

He had to satisfy Aris's curiosity little by little to buy time—and strengthen himself as quickly as possible.

'..... It's going to be an incredibly tough life in the Sword Dragon Hall.'

Still, Aris never blinked or averted her eyes, staring directly at Ian.

He didn't avoid her gaze, swallowed dryly.

This was it.

The very moment his hectic, chaotic life in the Sword Dragon Hall began.

Chapter 78 : Preparing One's Self to be Thrown into the Spider's Web (1)

Preparing One's Self to be Thrown into the Spider's Web (1)

The exams to determine the top student at the Sword Dragon Hall were held twice each year.

The rare rewards given to the top student were also awarded twice every year.

If one possessed enough skill to utterly overwhelm the other students of their cohort, then legendary treasures—such as Heavenly Blood Pill, crafted from the Heavenly Sword Lord's blood, or the famed sword Flostilla—could be monopolized, twice each year.

'Honestly, becoming the top student itself isn't a problem at all.'

Currently, Ian's level was at the entry-stage of Swordmaster.

Meanwhile, the new students who entered the hall this term alongside Ian averaged only at the lower tier among users.

Of course, there were outliers such as Hector, Kargon, and Kuga whose abilities far surpassed the average, but evezn they were only at the intermediate or high-rank among users.

Even Charlotte, who transferred down from the cohort above, was merely at the highest user level, and even Yuria, hailed as a genius, was only at the entry-stage of Expert.

'Moreover, it's not just a difference in aura level.'

There was an immense gap in the depth and prowess of swordsmanship as well.

They were all fledglings who had probably never even faced a real opponent before, while Ian was a veteran who had survived by shaving off bone and flesh in the hells of the Hisperion civil war and the Human-Demon War in his previous life.

The comparison simply didn't add up from the start.

'Even if all the new students of this batch attacked me at once, it wouldn't be difficult.'

What's more, this gap would only widen over time.

Ian possessed a growth rate so remarkable that, within just two months of his regression, he pulled his body—which had been unable to use mana—up to the level of Swordmaster.

Of course, this staggering speed of growth was the result of a convergence of supreme luck, so it would be difficult to maintain such a supernatural rate indefinitely.

'Even so, it won't take too long to regain my past level.'

He'd never achieved Grandmaster even in his previous life, so he honestly didn't know how long that might take, but reaching the peak of Swordmaster should be no problem before graduating from the Sword Dragon Hall, no matter how slowly.

'One of the reasons I entered the Sword Dragon Hall in the first place was for swift and safe growth.'

The main reason for entering the Sword Dragon Hall was, of course, to protect Yuria up close.

But there was also no place that could ensure growth as rapidly and as safely as this one.

'And first and foremost, the rewards given to the top student twice every year are, frankly, absurdly excellent.'

And with the Authority of Projection, Ian could replicate and multiply those top student rewards.

Even if Ian only received a single elixir on par with Heavenly Blood Pill, he could clone it into a hundred, gaining a hundredfold the effect.

'The only problem is, projection consumes an enormous amount of magic power. I'll need people who can guard me when my mana is depleted and I'm defenseless.'

That role was fulfilled by the instructors of the Sword Dragon Hall and the knights of the Heavenly Sword Palace.

On top of that, he would be provided with nutritious meals as good as any elixir, and given all the time and space he needed for training.

In effect, there was no better cradle for Ian's rise to Grandmaster than this.

'..... If only Aris weren't here.....'

In this life, Aris had become the head of the Sword Dragon Hall, turning it into a place that could no longer guarantee safety.

'And not only is Aris targeting me in particular, she isn't just anyone else, either.....'

She had said she wanted to know everything Ian was hiding, every last secret, one by one.

'What a headache.'

The big problem was not knowing what tricks Aris might pull next.

And the biggest issue was that Aris, driven by mere curiosity, was a madwoman who would easily pry open Ian's secrets, even his very belly.

'Protecting Sophia is as important as protecting Yuria, and so is protecting myself.'

It wouldn't be easy to maintain the same growth speed as before, but Ian had to keep moving forward at his very best pace.

So that, whenever Aris hatched some scheme, he could shake it off with greater strength.

'I have to regain my past level as quickly as possible.'

Before graduation from the Sword Dragon Hall? No.

Graduation from the Sword Dragon Hall was in four years.

That was far too late.

Aris could do who-knew-what as soon as tomorrow. Four years of defenselessness was unthinkable.

'I need to regain my past level much faster than that.'

At the latest, within a year.

He had to make it happen.

'Fortunately, there is a way.'

Though it involved taking on considerable risk, there wasn't no way to regain his previous level within a year.

'Regaining my former abilities ultimately comes down to acquiring a massive absolute quantity of mana.'

The understandings needed to reach the highest level of Swordmaster were already in his head.

In other words, as long as he had elixirs, it was possible.

'And the reward for the first final exam this time is……'

Millennium Golden Essence (千年金精).

It was a naturally-formed elixir created by the accumulation of iron energy in nature over a thousand years.

As befitted an elixir formed over a full millennium in the wild, pure magic power was massively condensed within the Millennium Golden Essence, and with proper assimilation, one could gain not only tremendous aura but also the added bonus of metal attribute.

'There could be no reward more perfect for me right now.'

Not to mention the immense importance of the vast aura held within the Millennium Golden Essence, the bonus of obtaining the metal attribute was just what Ian needed.

'Gaining the metal attribute will make handling thunder energy (雷氣) much easier.'

The Heavenly Palace's advanced cultivation method for controlling thunder energy he received from the Heavenly Sword Lord, thundercloud Heart, was top tier, but the thunder energy it accumulated in his dantian was extremely difficult to manage.

Thunder energy boasted extremely powerful force and speed, but was hard to control, leading to magic power being wasted, and its overuse put a severe strain on the body.

'But if used alongside metal-attributed aura, all those weaknesses are greatly mitigated.'

Thunder energy naturally followed metal energy, so if one possessed metal-attributed aura, the irregular flows of thunder energy could be much more easily reined in.

And reinforcing his body like steel with metal aura would greatly reduce the damage caused by wielding thunder energy.

'The fact that Millennium Golden Essence was chosen as this reward..... it must have been Aris's doing.'

It was Aris who announced the top student reward this time, and the Millennium Golden Essence was different from what was offered in his previous life.

'I heard that in my previous life, the first final exam's reward was not Millennium Golden Essence, but an Orichalcum Cuirass.'

Aris had publicly introduced both the exam details and the top student reward at the end of the induction ceremony.

'That woman... What on earth is she up to?'

Aris knew Ian was training in Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds.

After all, the Heavenly Sword Lord wrote in a letter that Aris had personally chosen that technique as a gift.

'She's blatantly offering the exact elixir I need as a reward.'

Even just one Millennium Golden Essence would grant Ian's aura explosive growth and make handling thunder energy much easier.

If he duplicated it multiple times using the Authority of Projection, he could reach the highest level of Swordmaster, and wield thunder energy with almost perfect mastery using metal aura.

Of course, there was no chance Aris knew about the Authority of Projection.

'Does she want to see how much of my full power I'll reveal to get my hands on the Millennium Golden Essence?'

Is she shaking the bait I need most, hoping to make me display my full might?

'Any other hidden intentions? None come to mind right away.'

But Ian would hardly reveal his full power against mere new students.

Besides, Aris personally witnessed Ian defeating Dellen, who was already a Swordmaster, so she must be aware of this.

'In that case...'

She was probably secretly preparing opponents strong enough that even Ian would find them difficult to handle.

To force Ian to reveal his hidden strength, no matter what.

'The Millennium Golden Essence is just the beginning, meant to drag me into this exam.'

Once he actually entered the test, there was a high chance even more varied bait items and traps would be awaiting him.

'Participating in this exam is basically walking into the spider's web Aris has laid out.'

Honestly, if possible, he would have liked to avoid it.

'But avoiding it would only provoke Aris even more in the end.'

If Ian dodged this test, it would only convince Aris he was hiding even more important secrets than the Millennium Golden Essence.

Then Aris would drive him even harder, using increasingly extreme means to forcibly draw out what he was keeping hidden.

'It's a real no-win situation. I have to walk into the trap, knowing full well it's there.'

There was one bit of relief.

Even though Aris had become head of the Sword Dragon Hall, her faction was not the only one within the hall.

Though the Heavenly Sword Lord was away on an expedition, the most influential faction in the Heavenly Sword Palace remained the lord's own.

No matter how reckless Aris might be, she couldn't openly cause a major incident under the eyes of the lord's supporters.

At the very least, Yuria or Sophia would not be in danger of anything too serious.

'Moreover...'

Aris did not yet know all of Ian's abilities.

Because of that, there was a chance she would more thoroughly prepare traps from all directions. But unless she discovered Ian's Authority of Projection, it was impossible for her to design a trap that could fully ensnare him.

'The exam was described as an uninhabited island survival.'

But it wasn't simply about surviving on a deserted island.

'There were a lot of restrictions.'

Use of aura was forbidden in this exam, and bringing the sword received at the sword spirit ritual was also disallowed.

'Not being able to use Vladiark.....'

Did Aris think she could easily toy with me if she just separated me from Vladiark?

'If that's what she thinks...'

Whatever traps Aris had prepared this time, that idea would prove her downfall.

'It's true that my combat power drops a lot without Vladiark.'

If Ian had Vladiark, he'd have a fighting chance even against a Grand Duke, but without it, he'd struggle even to handle a high-ranked Swordmaster opponent.

'So it makes no sense for me to leave behind Vladiark and take this exam.'

I had to bring Vladiark as a secret trump card, no matter what.

'Luckily, I have a good method.'

Ian recalled the spatial storage artifact stored at the Lunabreeze mansion.

Artifact use was forbidden in Sword Dragon Hall exams, so he couldn't use the artifact itself.

'But if I use projection to duplicate just the storage magic within the artifact...'

He could use that magic to secretly bring Vladiark to the exam.

'So it doesn't matter what kind of trap Aris sets.'

As long as Ian had a way to secretly bring Vladiark, Aris's plan was already as good as failed.

After all, Aris's entire plan would be based on the assumption that Ian could not use Vladiark.

If she did lay traps involving absurdly powerful foes, Ian could simply answer them with the equally absurd power of Vladiark.

'There are approximately two months left until the deserted island exam.'

It would take just over a month to project the storage magic from the spatial artifact.

'Plenty of time left.'

Now, all that remained was—

'Resolve.'

The resolve to bite onto the bait Aris dangled before him.

The resolve to dive into the web of the black widow spider.

'All right then... Let's do this. Aris Hisperion.'

A calm determination flickered quietly in Ian's eyes.

This just shows that regression really isn't a fix all...

One wrong move and you'd catch the eye of a monster that could bring you danger...

Chapter 79 : Preparing One's Self to be Thrown into the Spider's Web (2)

Preparing One's Self to be Thrown into the Spider's Web (2)

There were two months left until the deserted island survival exam, which would determine the top student of the first semester this year.

Ian organized the things he had to prepare.

'First of all.'

He would absorb all the remaining aura in Vladiark and raise his level to lower late-stage Swordmaster.

Currently, Ian's level was at the entry of Swordmaster.

And there was still about a third of the aura left in Vladiark that he hadn't absorbed yet.

'To completely absorb it all and make it my own... that should take about two weeks.'

On weekdays, he would return as soon as his duties at the Sword Dragon Hall were done and train his aura until dawn; on weekends, he would pull all-nighters. By doing so, he should be able to absorb all the aura stored in Vladiark within about two weeks.

'Two weeks... it's a little tight, but there's no big problem. As long as there are no unexpected variables.'

Then, what came next?

'Second.'

He would project and acquire the storage magic of the subspace artifact.

'This is the most important task.'

Aris had forbidden the use of the sword received during the Sword Selection Ceremony in this deserted island exam.

There must have been some scheme behind adding such a condition.

If he wanted to secretly carry Vladiark in preparation for any traps she might set on the island, he had to make sure to project the storage magic.

'This will take about a month and a week more.'

Magic that manipulated space-time, like subspace storage spells, belonged to the most rare and difficult branch.

Very few could handle it even among the seventh-circle mages—the highest level attainable with a human body.

Those who could use space-time magic were almost all great mages above the 8th-circle, monsters who had either given up on or transcended the human body to become something else.

Even though subspace storage magic had a lower level of difficulty among space-time magics, its complexity still placed it in the highest tier.

To compare it to aura levels, at least early-stage Grandmaster or above would be required.

'To think I can acquire such an amazing spell in just over a month.'

It was thanks to Vladiark and countless fortunate encounters.

If he were still at the Expert rank instead of Swordmaster, it would have taken at least half a year, or over three years at worst.

'Of course, even three years would be astoundingly fast compared to ordinary mages.'

Without the Authority of Projection, subspace magic was something he'd have trouble handling in a lifetime, let alone three years.

It was a moment when he once again realized the overwhelming performance of this transcendent authority: to be able to use a magic that even genius mages might need decades to learn, in just a month.

'Aside from those two things...'

The rest were simply daily tasks.

As usual, training his swordsmanship and physical fitness together with Sophia.

Bringing Charlotte into the annex to help with housework, just as the Heavenly Sword Lord had requested.

And...

He simply had to live quietly at the Sword Dragon Hall for two months, so that Aris wouldn't hatch any new schemes.

'I'd like to get closer to Yuria before the exam if possible.'

But if he were to show such a closeness, Aris might be provoked.

Aris saw Yuria as nothing but an obstacle to succeeding the family head.

If he showed any closeness to Yuria, there was a good chance Aris would believe Yuria was coveting Ian, whom she had marked for herself.

If, due to such a misunderstanding, that crazy woman tried to harm Yuria, all of Ian's painstaking plans would collapse.

Until Ian was able to handle Aris perfectly, it was best to avoid provoking her and quietly focus on his growth.

'Haa... Aris...'

He hadn't entered the Sword Dragon Hall just to tiptoe around and mind her moods.

He had come to build as many happy memories as possible with Yuria and Sophia.

'Tsk.'

But with things already at this point, complaining wouldn't change anything.

Besides, the situation wasn't even that bad for him to grumble about.

'Alright. Enough with the spoiled complaints.'

There would always be some disappointments.

If nothing was lacking, then he'd be a god, not a human.

It was his job to resolve these issues for the sake of those he cared about.

–Nod.

With that, Ian got up from his desk.

He burned the densely written plan with the flame of a scented candle.

Before he knew it, it was deep night with the moon at its zenith.

Sophia was sound asleep on the large bed, breathing softly.

"....."

Ian gently brushed away the strand of hair stuck to Sophia's lips and lay down.

Tomorrow, a busy daily routine would begin.

* * *

The morning of the new school term.

The Sword Dragon Hall's schedule proceeded as if they were preparing for end-of-term exams.

The end-of-term exam this semester was a deserted island survival.

Accordingly, the classes and training focused on wilderness survival skills, camouflage, ambushes, countering surprise attacks, and other content necessary for surviving on a deserted island.

"Uwaaa!!"

During the break after the written test on distinguishing medicinal herbs and poisonous plants, Sophia frantically ruffled her own hair.

"F-fifty-seven...!? I thought I'd get at least 80! Waaah! It's so hard to tell the plants apart! No matter how much I look, I just don't get it! Heueeung..."

Sophia collapsed onto her desk as if she were melting.

Ian quietly patted her on the shoulder.

"You just haven't had enough practice yet. If you keep at it, it'll get easy to tell them apart soon."

"Uu... What score did you get, young master?"

"Me?"

Ian glanced sideways at his own test paper.

100 points.

For a moment, he wondered if he should intentionally answer some questions wrong to avoid drawing unnecessary attention with an overly high score.

But he thought it over and just marked them all correctly.

It wasn't as if Aris would lose interest just because he got a few questions wrong, and since written exam scores and class attitude factored into picking the top student, he decided to keep it perfect.

'Luckily the written test was easy.'

He remembered living almost like a primitive person in the forest with his comrades during the Hisperion civil war in his previous life, so it was simple for him.

Thanks to that experience, basic distinction between poisonous and medicinal plants wasn't difficult at all.

"Oh, wow! 100 points?!"

Sophia saw all the circles on Ian's answer sheet and collapsed again atop her desk like a deflated balloon.

"Ugh... I thought at least I'd finally beat you in a written test, young master...!!"

Ian laughed out loud at the sight of Sophia.

"……?"

At that moment, he sensed a gaze from nearby.

When he immediately turned his head, he saw Hector glaring at Ian from among his group.

"... Tch."

After glaring for a moment, Hector clicked his tongue and looked away.

"……"

Ian clicked his tongue with a hint of regret.

'If he's going to pick a fight, he should just do it quickly.'

For days now, Hector had only been glaring at Ian.

He never spoke nor tried to physically bump into him.

Occasionally, he'd show a wicked smile, suggesting he was up to something sneaky.

'Maybe I should go deal with him myself.'

He sometimes thought that, but for now, it was best to hold back if possible.

Hector might seem like nothing but a thug, but he was actually the direct son of one of Hisperion's most prestigious vassal families.

By vassal family rank, his house was several steps above the Greysel family.

If Ian carelessly provoked him, he'd be hard-pressed to avoid a severe penalty.

Since disciplinary records would also affect the selection of the top student, it was wisest to endure for now.

'A good opportunity will come soon anyway.'

Dealing with Hector should be saved for practical training or exams.

At those times, he could publicly beat him to a pulp, right up to the brink of death.

That should make Hector behave himself from then on.

Unless he actually wanted to suffer even worse consequences.

"....."

Having organized his thoughts, Ian turned his gaze away.

Then, as he was opening his textbook to prepare for the next lesson—

–Tap.

"...?"

A slip of paper fell out from between the pages.

'What's this?'

He picked it up and unfolded it. The handwriting was all too familiar.

'Yuria?'

It was unmistakably Yuria's handwriting.

'The content is...'

–Ian Greysel. Come behind the old school building's storage after class. I have something to say.

–Note: Don't let anyone see you. Come alone. Make sure you're by yourself.

That was all.

'Why is this so suspicious...'

She didn't even write her name.

Had he not recognized Yuria's handwriting, he might have ignored it.

As Ian tucked the note away, the instructor came in and started the theoretical lecture.

–Riiiiiing!

Soon, all classes and training for the day ended, and the bell rang signaling the end of activities.

"Uu... I'm hungry, young master... Let's go home, quick!"

"Go on ahead today. Go with Miss Charlotte."

"Huh? What about you, young master? Aren't you coming with me?"

"I have somewhere to stop by."

"Where?"

"Sorry. I won't be late. I'll come back before dinner. See you soon~!"

Ian brushed off Sophia's questions and headed toward the storage building behind the old schoolhouse.

"Tell me where you're going!!"

Sophia's voice ringing from behind, but since Yuria told him to come alone, he couldn't tell her.

–Rustle, rustle, rustle.

Behind the old school building's storage, where few people ever walked.

With weeds growing up to his knees, it was hard to get through.

"You're here quickly. Ian Greysel."

When he arrived, Yuria was already waiting.

"This note. Did you send it, milady?"

Ian asked, even though he already knew.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"I have something to tell you."

Yuria stretched her neck out, scanning behind Ian, then glanced over her own shoulder before beckoning Ian closer.

"Come a bit closer."

"....."

Ian did as she said and stepped closer.

Only when he was right beside her, a handspan away, did Yuria give a nod.

"Let me borrow your ear for a second. I have to say this quietly."

"....."

Ian nodded and leaned in to listen.

It was a request he would never have agreed to from anyone else.

"Alright, then..."

Yuria cupped her hands around her mouth and whispered in Ian's ear.

"... I wanted to let you know, you might be in danger."

"...?"

Ian blinked and turned toward Yuria.

"Ack, wah!"

Yuria jumped back like a startled cat.

"M-my lips! We almost touched!"

"Ah. Sorry."

But what did she mean?

What's this about me being in danger?

"Huu..."

Placing her hand on her chest, Yuria steadied herself before again cupping her hands at her mouth.

"... My sister seems really interested in you. ... You might not understand just from that, but this is bad news for you."

"Ah."

So, that was what this was about.

As if he wouldn't understand.

He knew better than anyone.

"By 'your sister' you mean?"

"Aris Hisperion... She joined the Sword Dragon Hall this time, right?"

Of course.

Ian already knew Aris was plotting something against him.

Even so, he didn't show it on his face.

Right now, he wanted to hear more of what Yuria wanted to say.

"Could you explain in more detail?"

"Yes. I know it's... a lot to process all of a sudden. But you have to believe me. I'm not saying this to deceive or confuse you."

There was a pleading earnestness in Yuria's eyes.

"... You trust me, right?"

Honestly, it was the kind of face he wanted to tease a little.

"No."

"Y-you have to trust me! You're really in danger! If you're late, it might be too late!!"

Yuria stomped her feet and shook Ian by the collar.

Ian suppressed the corners of his mouth, which wanted to curl into a smile, and nodded.

"All right. I'll listen, at least."

"Huu... Okay. You don't have to trust me, but at least hear me out... You really need to be careful."

She glanced all around once more. Then Yuria leaned close to Ian's ear again.

Ian listened quietly.

Yuria's warm breath tickled his ear.

"My sister... I mean Aris Hisperion... she's not as nice as everyone thinks."

–Whoosh!

After saying this, Yuria glanced sideways at Ian to gauge his reaction.

"....."

Ian looked down at Yuria with a calm face.

She nodded and leaned in again.

"To be honest, she's almost like a murderer...! I know it sounds sudden and crazy...! But you really have to believe me...!!!"

Ian didn't think it was crazy or shocking.

He was touched.

'This is not something she could bring up easily...'

That she cared enough about him to tell him this...

'Yuria... you really...'

Just like in his previous life, she was coming to save him again.

"And take this."

Yuria removed a ring from her finger and held it out.

"It'll help you if you're in danger."

"This is...!"

Ian's eyes lit up when he saw the ring.

The ring that Yuria offered was a priceless heirloom made from the teeth she shed as a child.

Heavenly Bone Ring(天骨輪).

And—

If Ian used it, it would allow him to accelerate his plan more than twice as fast.

Chapter 80 : Preparing One's Self to be Thrown into the Spider's Web (3)

Preparing One's Self to be Thrown into the Spider's Web (3)

"And here—take this too."

Yuria unclasped the necklace from her neck and handed it over.

"It's an artifact with a shield and detoxification functions. Remember, it only works if you wear it with that ring."

"...!"

After the Heavenly Bone Ring, she was letting him borrow this as well...?

Ian, holding the necklace in his hand, moved his lips in a complicated expression.

"....."

The necklace that still held a warm trace of Yuria's body heat.

This necklace was a keepsake her birth mother had left behind.

A protective artifact left to guard the Yuria who would be left alone after her mother's long journey.

Corgardin.

'She barely uses this herself, even when she needs it.'

Corgardin was a powerful artifact that could automatically manifest a shield strong enough to block the slash of a Grandmaster, and to immediately neutralize poison terrible enough to melt a dragon's hide.

However, it was undeniably consumable.

Once all of the magic power of Yuria's birth mother, Riana, sealed within the pendant ran out, Corgardin would simply crumble into dust.

'So usually, Yuria just keeps this treasure safely locked in her secret box.'

After all, this necklace was one of the few keepsakes in which Yuria could still feel any trace of her late mother.

'And yet, she's lending me something this precious...'

Ian clutched the necklace tightly, feeling a deep sense of responsibility.

"It's... it's precious, so you absolutely can't lose it, okay?"

"....."

Ian was overwhelmed with a feeling he couldn't put into words.

Between the Heavenly Bone Ring made from her own bone and Corgardin, her mother's keepsake.

Both were among the top class of artifacts even in Hisperion, and held even greater meaning for Yuria personally.

Ian gripped the Heavenly Bone Ring and Corgardin tightly and nodded firmly.

"I swear. I will never lose them, nor let them be damaged. I will protect them more dearly than my own heart."

"O-oh? T-that much? I appreciate it, but I'm lending them so you'll be careful, so don't overdo it. You must use them if you're ever in danger! That's the whole reason I'm lending them. And if they break, then it can't be helped... B-but if you return them safely... I think I'd be happy. Heh."

Yuria scratched her cheek awkwardly, shifting her gaze to the side in embarrassment.

Ian, just as he often had in their previous life, wanted to pull her into an embrace, but at this point, their relationship wasn't at that stage.

"T-then, let's confirm before you go! You haven't forgotten what I told you, right?"

"... To be careful of Lady Aris."

Yuria nodded.

"That's right. For a while, you should act as if you're paranoid. Don't forget! Make sure to lock up, never just eat things someone gives you! Double-check all the security devices in the mansion. If there's anything suspicious, no matter what it is, be sure to tell me. Even if it seems trivial, just talk to me first. I'll help you however I can."

Ian bowed his head.

"I will remember. And I will also handle the items you've lent me with utmost care. Thank you."

"... You do trust me, right?"

"Yes. I do. If it was you telling me, lady Yuria, I would believe you if you said the sun was the moon."

"Come on, don't joke! Be serious!"

Ian nodded.

"I believe you, sincerely. I will be thorough in my precautions, as you advised."

In fact, he already was.

You could never be cautious enough with Aris.

"... Good. Then that's fine."

Yuria quickly glanced around.

"Well, I should go. It's not good to linger here too long. My sister's eyes are everywhere in the Sword Dragon Hall."

Yuria pulled her cadet uniform's hood down low.

"Then Ian, you go first. I'll wait here a bit longer and leave about five minutes after you. If Aris finds out we were together, she'll definitely interrogate us about what we talked about, both you and me."

"... Understood. Then, I'll excuse myself first."

"Yeah. Go."

"Then..."

Ian made a brief bow and left first.

As she said, there was no good in the two of them being seen together by Aris.

Ian, having also pulled his hood low, looked around to make sure no one was eavesdropping, then walked out of the Sword Dragon Hall.

Fortunately, it seemed there was no one tailing him.

There were no dangerous presences, so Yuria should be able to return safely.

Now, it was time to return to Lunabreeze and instruct Charlotte on what to do next.

* * *

The annex, Lunabreeze, where Ian resided.

—Thud! Thump!

Sophia set down Charlotte's two suitcases in the living room.

"Phew! So heavy! Is this all your luggage?"

"... Yes."

"Then please have a seat on the sofa! Young master will be here soon! Would you like some tea?"

"... Black tea."

"Yes! I'll bring it right away!"

"Hmph."

Charlotte snorted, watching Sophia rush into the kitchen.

'That older sister... I like how polite she is.'

When Sophia first approached her and introduced herself as a girl living together with Ian, she'd been quite shocked, but seeing how Sophie had behaved along the way, it didn't seem like she needed to be that wary.

'But still, to think Ian was living with someone like her in the annex.'

Ian. That woman. Just what was their relationship?

When Charlotte had asked Sophia earlier about her family, Sophia had said she grew up in an orphanage and didn't really know—so she didn't seem to be a noble, but rather a commoner.

Judging by her Sword Dragon Hall cadet uniform, Sophia wasn't strictly Ian's personal maid, either.

'Then... could it be...'

His girlfriend?

'I-Ian Greysel...! Quicker than he looks...! Not bad!'

Though Ian was a year younger than her, he was already living with his lover!

Charlotte prided herself on being rather mature for her age, but she had never even held a boy's hand.

'I-Immoral! Ian Greysel!'

Soon, Sophia brought the black tea.

Charlotte considered asking what her relationship with Ian was, but decided against it. The atmosphere wasn't yet relaxed enough for that kind of question.

"Wow, I'm really hungry...! I'll get dinner started! Please, make yourself at home, miss!"

Sophia, saying she would prepare dinner, returned to the kitchen while Charlotte sipped her warm tea and looked around the living room.

'This house isn't bad... It's a bit behind compared to the Heavenly Gold Hall where I used to live, but it should do well enough for a while.'

Compared to the shabby inn where she'd been staying for the past few weeks, this place was practically a paradise.

'No more smelly rooms and bad food... No more washing with cold water in a bucket... No more hand-washing with hard soap...! I won't have to get up before dawn for city wall construction anymore, either!'

—Clack!

Just then, she heard the sound of the front door opening.

—Step. Step. Step.

Followed by someone striding inside.

"Uhk...!"

Charlotte instinctively stiffened, snapping her head around.

'I-Is it Ian? S-stay calm...'

She straightened her cadet uniform and steadied her breathing.

In truth, this was unthinkable for her under normal circumstances.

Her whole life, Charlotte had been the one waited upon, not the one greeting others.

"Young master!"

At that moment, Sophia, wearing her apron, burst from the kitchen to greet Ian.

"Hm? Making dinner?"

"Yes! But where were you? I asked earlier, but you left without answering!"

"I'll explain later. But where is Lady Charlotte?"

"... Ah!"

Hearing Ian ask for her, Charlotte swallowed nervously.

'D-do I need to go out and greet him? How should I greet him!?'

She couldn't act haughty, chin raised, as she had in the Heavenly Gold Hall.

She was at this annex to serve as a maid.

But she also didn't want to be so humble as to grovel pitifully.

Just what was the right attitude toward Ian now...? It was a dilemma.

'Like the butler... I could be elegant like the butler... but how did the butler usually greet people...?'

Even though she had received such greetings every day, her mind drew a blank.

—Step. Step. Step.

Ian's footsteps grew closer.

Charlotte bit her lip.

'N-no! Why am I so nervous? I'm the Heavenly Sword Lord's third daughter, and Ian is just a guest!'

But as soon as she thought that, she remembered Ian's frightening eyes.

"Eep...!"

She couldn't imagine how Ian might react if she tried to act proud or defiant.

'Those eyes really look as if he could do anything without a second thought...'

Logically, as the Heavenly Sword Lord's third daughter, there was no way Ian would dare do anything to her.

Still, seeing Ian's eyes made her body shrink in on itself.

Ian was a year younger than her, about the same height, and of lower status.

'At this rate, I won't just fail to make Ian my subordinate—I'll be branded as nothing but a cowardly joke...!'

In the end, Charlotte only fidgeted and couldn't bring herself to go out first.

—Step.

Soon, Ian appeared in the living room.

"...!"

The moment Charlotte met Ian's eyes, she froze like ice.

"Uhk...!"

His expression was quite different from the menacing stare he'd given her at the opening ceremony a few days prior.

Rather than being filled with murderous intent, his gaze was much more collected.

But that didn't mean his hostility had vanished.

A chillingly calm apathy rested in Ian's eyes.

'Ugh...!'

Just his gaze felt as if her heart had been struck.

A sharp sting pierced her chest as if her heart had been pricked.

"... Uh! ... Ah!"

Desperate to break the awkward atmosphere, she tried to greet him, but her throat caught.

She barely made a sound, lips moving uselessly.

"....."

"....."

After a brief, silent exchange of gazes—

It was Ian who spoke first.

"Was your journey comfortable, lady Charlotte?"

Though a courteous greeting, his tone was as cold as his eyes.

"Y-yes... it was."

"That's good to hear."

Ian checked the leather watch on his wrist.

"It's nearly time for dinner. Would you please prepare the evening meal?"

"Wha, what?!"

R-right away? Asking her to work straight off?!

I-Isn't showing me my room and letting me unpack supposed to come first?

"A-ah, that is..."

On top of that, dinner prep right away!

She'd lived her whole life never even pouring herself a glass of water—she'd only tried it a few weeks ago.

"Why are you standing still?"

Ian's gaze grew colder.

"N-no, it's just..."

How could he ask her to do something she'd never done before?

She couldn't possibly do it properly.

If she went into the kitchen now and ruined dinner, what would happen...?

Ian would no doubt look at her with an even colder, more contemptuous face.

Even Sophia, always gentle and kind, might look down on her.

If that happened, her life at this house would become as hellish as her time at the shabby inn.

'Augh! No! Being despised by Ian and looked down on even by a commoner?!'

"....."

Charlotte fumbled uncertainly. Ian let out a silent sigh.

"If it's difficult, then don't bother. But if you won't cooperate, I can't help you. I'll write to the Heavenly Sword Lord and tell him you were unfit to serve me. Please see yourself out."

"Wha-what?!"

Just a bit of hesitation and he was about to throw her out!

'G-getting thrown out is not an option!'

If she was expelled from here, she'd have to return to that shabby, filthy, miserable, uncomfortable, and downright creepy inn.

She'd just been lucky these past few weeks, but there were plenty of mercenaries on the street with grudges against Charlotte.

She'd sent them on terrible assignments for money, working them to the bone several times.

If she ran into any of them at night, even she might not come out unscathed.

Besides...

'If I disappoint father again, I'm finished!'

The Heavenly Sword Lord had given Charlotte a generous opportunity.

Technically, he'd told her to humble herself by serving as a servant in Ian's house, but deep down, he wished to create a bond between her and Ian, who was regarded as an unparalleled genius.

'If I throw away this chance, father will never give me another...!'

Although the Heavenly Sword Lord wasn't as cold-hearted as Charlotte thought, sometimes fear distorted reality.

"I-I'll do it! Right now! I-I can! Anything!"

Clutching her skirt, Charlotte answered urgently.

She dreaded the idea of returning to that wretched life on the street, and even more so, the notion of disappointing her father.

"....."

Ian blinked twice, as if surprised by Charlotte's desperate response.

No other emotional reaction showed on his face.

Ian's eyes quickly returned to their icy calm.

"Then, please help Sophia with dinner right away. She'll tell you what to do in the kitchen."

He added in a low voice.

"And Sophia is staying here as my family, not as a maid. Please do not treat her as a servant. I emphasize, just in case."

"... Y-yessir."

Charlotte's ears burned at her small reply.

It was deeply aggravating and humiliating to have to listen quietly to someone younger and of lower status than herself.

"Then, go help Sophia right away. The kitchen is that way."

Charlotte pursed her lips and headed to the kitchen.

'Humiliating... This is just too humiliating...! Me, of all people...! Being ordered around so completely like a maid...!'

Most of all, she was ashamed that she couldn't even protest in such a degrading situation.

'... But right now, I have no choice. I know... sob... There's nothing I can do but endure...! This is father's wish... Once I gain Ian's trust...! Everything will change then...!'

Trying to console herself, Charlotte entered the kitchen.

What greeted her was a chaos of scattered ingredients.

Charlotte felt her breath catch in her throat.

Why were there so many things?

How was she supposed to deal with all of these?

'N-no...!'

Charlotte shook her head vigorously.

'I-I can get through this step by step! I'll adapt soon. Yes. I can endure...! If I build up trust bit by bit every day, Ian will soon be mine...!'

But even as she thought that, deep down Charlotte knew the truth.

"Ugh...!"

In the face of Ian's contemptuous gaze, she would freeze up and be unable to do anything as she wished.

"S-Sophia... I-I was told to come help with dinner... W-where should I start...?"

Thus began day one of Charlotte's life as a servant.