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

## Chapter 81 : Preparing One's Self to be Thrown into the Spider's Web (4)

Preparing One's Self to be Thrown into the Spider's Web (4)

'I never thought I'd live to see the day I'd eat a meal prepared by Charlotte.'

That would have been unimaginable in Ian's previous life.

Back then, Charlotte always looked down on Ian with an overbearing attitude.

'And she never cooked anything herself.'

This must have been the first time she'd ever cooked, whether in Ian's previous or his current life.

Even when camping, Charlotte would have someone else boil water for her, and whenever someone caught game, it was always the companions who handled the butchering.

Let alone in the Heavenly Sword Palace, which was full of servants.

'But this is unexpected.'

Tonight's menu was pork curry.

'I was sure she'd butcher the vegetables or serve up meat burnt to a crisp.'

Surprisingly, though, the curry had turned out just fine.

The meat and vegetables were cut into bite-sized pieces, and they were cooked perfectly.

It was probably because Sophia was right next to Charlotte, carefully teaching her step-by-step as she worked.

Given Charlotte's personality, I thought she'd lose her temper or clash with Sophia at least once, but it seemed Charlotte had obediently followed Sophia's guidance.

If she hadn't, the results wouldn't have been this good.

'Charlotte's not a fool. Maybe she's already realized Sophia is her lifeline.'

Sophia was the only person Charlotte could rely on here.

The only people in this mansion, aside from Sophia, were Ian, Ophelia, and Sheryl.

Ian made no effort to hide his dislike for Charlotte, so it would be hard for her to even strike up a conversation; Ophelia was strictly fulfilling her role as a monitor and didn't help Charlotte at all, and Sheryl was either in the manager's room or out, appearing only briefly when ordering food or supplies.

If Charlotte managed to get on Sophia's bad side in this situation, she'd be completely isolated in this mansion.

Charlotte was quite sharp in her own way. She seemed to have instinctively realized how she needed to behave around Sophia.

'I hope every day continues like today. That would take a lot of worries off my mind when it comes to Charlotte.'

Now, it was late at night.

Just as planned, it was time to absorb the aura stored in Vladiark until dawn.

— Swish.

Ian pulled out the white ring, Heavenly Bone Ring, that he had received from Yuria from his pocket.

A small ring, as white as pure porcelain and flawless, like precious jade.

Yuria had lent the Heavenly Bone Ring to Ian because it was necessary to activate the protective necklace Corgadin.

Corgadin was an artifact that protected Yuria's body.

And since the Heavenly Bone Ring was a ring made from Yuria's milk teeth, wearing it would allow him to be protected by Corgadin.

'However.'

Yuria probably lent the ring to protect Ian with Corgadin, but Ian knew an even more useful way to utilize it.

'With this, I can speed up my plans by more than twice the original pace.'

Training internal energy is much like breathing.

Breathe too hastily, and your throat burns; your airway gets hot.

It's the same with aura cultivation.

Absorbing the aura stored in Vladiark too quickly would inevitably cause the mana circuits to overheat, and if you kept pushing through, the circuits would tear or burst.

Pain could be endured, and damaged mana circuits could be healed by laying a projection over them, but that would be a waste of time and magic power.

But using the Heavenly Bone Ring could solve all those problems.

'The Heavenly Bone Ring can transform normal mana into Heavenly Energy and even store it.'

If you injected aura into the ring and rotated it once, the aura would instantly be imbued with the energy of the heavens.

Heavenly Energy held the power to grow mana circuits to their ultimate form.

That's why, no matter how fast you absorbed Heavenly Energy-infused aura, the mana circuits wouldn't overheat.

Rather, the faster you drew it in, the deeper the power of Heavenly Energy would soak into the circuits, making them tougher and wider.

That's why the Heavenly Bone Ring was primarily used to heal swordsmen whose mana circuits had been damaged.

'It would have been even better if I could store that Heavenly Energy in my dantian.'

Regrettably, Heavenly Energy could only be maintained inside an extremely blessed body, like Yuria's among the Hisperion.

Within Ian's dantian, Heavenly Energy would keep its properties for a short while, but soon after, it would revert back to ordinary attribute-less magic power.

'But that's not really a big loss.'

Right now, just the fact that the Heavenly Bone Ring would completely eliminate mana circuit overheating was more than enough.

'If I wear the Heavenly Bone Ring while absorbing the aura in Vladiark...'

In the original plan, it would have taken about two weeks to reach the early-stage Swordmaster, but with the Heavenly Bone Ring, it could very well be possible within one week.

'Projecting the spatial storage magic of the artifact should also be possible within a month.'

Even using Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds without Vladiark, as long as Ian was wearing the Heavenly Bone Ring, he could operate without worrying about mana circuit overheating and train much more boldly.

'Yuria... Thank you so much.'

Ian squeezed the ring and pressed it to his forehead.

The original plan wasn't impossible, but it was quite a stretch in many ways; thanks to Yuria, he could finally breathe easy.

Now, he had leeway to handle any variables in the deserted island test, and, if any time remained after finishing all the essential tasks, he could train Sophia or focus on further strengthening Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds's thunder force.

'Yuria has given me this time. I can't waste it. Let's start right away.'

Ian slipped the Heavenly Bone Ring onto his ring finger.

Then he sat cross-legged and held Vladiark vertically before him.

Soon, aura began to be slowly drawn in through the Heavenly Bone Ring.

Vladiark gradually crumbled, dropping iron filings, and the aura absorbed by the Heavenly Bone Ring turned pure white, flowing down Ian's ring finger and, following the Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds incantation, into his dantian.

Heavenly Energy gently caressed Ian's mana circuits—

The power that had saved him in his previous life.

Embracing the sensation of Heavenly Energy and snatches of memories with Yuria that floated up from time to time, Ian continued his cultivation until the moon set.

* * *

Two months passed quickly.

Every morning, work started at the Sword Dragon Hall; every evening, Ian practiced magic power training and worked to project storage magic bit by bit—a daily routine that repeated.

Through two months of training, Sophia managed to reach early-stage User.

For an ordinary girl to reach early-stage User a mere three months after starting aura training was an impossible pace under normal circumstances.

It was thanks to Ian sharing the Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds incantation with her.

By using Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds—one of the most supreme cultivation techniques with countless legends—Sophia grew rapidly.

Of course, it was extremely challenging to operate as such a top-tier cultivation method, but Ian sat with Sophia, directly circulating aura for her, helping her get a feel for Sky Thunder, Deep as the Clouds.

Of course, even with that, she was an utter mess at first, and even now she still couldn't operate it properly. But just muddling through for two months of steady practice let Sophia, who had only started learning aura three months ago, soar to early-stage User in no time.

Truly, it had the power worthy of being one of the continent's greatest cultivation methods.

It drove home how precious a gift the lord of the Heavenly Sword House had bestowed.

— Shhhhhh!

After dinner, Charlotte was washing dishes.

— Clatter! Clatter!

— Achoo!

Charlotte had gotten quite used to the household chores in the past two months.

Every day, Sophia and Ian took turns teaching her the work; maybe because she was naturally bright, she learned things quickly once taught.

Sometimes she'd make weird groaning noises like, "Heeeng...,"

"Huung...," or "Ugh...!"

Especially when made to clean the bathroom, she'd mutter, "M-me, doing this...!" and stand there, spaced out, looking soulless for a while.

Still, no matter how easy, you can't learn anything without the will, and Charlotte, surprisingly, did her best and followed along with any task she was given.

'But this is only the beginning, Charlotte.'

The biggest enemies of household work aren't hardship but tedium and annoyance.

At first, there might be some fun in learning new things, but from now on, Charlotte would just be repeating the same chores, so her real test had begun.

Moreover, Lunabreeze Mansion was not just a grand mansion but also a dormitory for swordsmen, so the scale of the chores was on a different level from a regular home.

The areas to clean were absurdly large, every day she had to prep food for four gluttons, and after personal training in the underground training hall, the cleanup always fell to Charlotte.

'However...'

Whether this would actually change Charlotte's arrogant personality as the lord of the Heavenly Sword House wished was uncertain.

'Well. At the very least, she might come to understand the hard work and perspective of the servants.'

If Charlotte realized how much convenience the servants had provided her, she might come to appreciate and respect them.

Whether that's exactly what the lord wanted, Ian couldn't be sure.

'But...'

Despite Charlotte having become a bit more cooperative recently, Ian's heart had not opened to her in the least.

Charlotte's unexpected compliance was only because of the authority of the lord of the Heavenly Sword House and Ian's own position.

'Charlotte is the epitome of the strong oppressing the weak, and bowing down to the strong.'

Ian hated people like that, having grown up abused by Hugo, someone who was just like that.

And Charlotte was a perfect example—a coward who oppressed the weak and submitted to the strong.

'Charlotte betrayed Yuria in my previous life because of her cowardly nature, too.'

That's why, as soon as Aris and the second prince threatened and enticed her, she immediately caved.

'Charlotte's overbearing attitude and arrogance aside, as long as her cowardly nature doesn't change, I'll never open my heart to her.'

Regardless of Ian's feelings, Sophia and Charlotte had grown quite close over the two months.

Whenever Charlotte ran into something she didn't know how to do, she always went to Sophia first, and Sophia never spared her praise, constantly stroking her head or hugging her.

Charlotte didn't seem to particularly dislike Sophia's physical affection.

Sometimes, she would even blush and try hard to hide a shy smile.

Charlotte had even allowed Sophia to call her by the nickname 'Lottie.'

Given that, in her past life, those who called her Lottie were mostly her mother or older siblings, it showed how quickly Sophia's geniality had melted Charlotte's heart.

'I thought Charlotte only listened to those stronger than her, but I didn't expect her to be weak to someone like Sophia.'

It was a new side to Charlotte Ian had never seen in his previous life.

'Well, Sophia is so outgoing, after all.'

Maybe that's how she quickly melted Charlotte's heart.

Ian himself had benefited greatly from Sophia's friendliness.

Thanks to her, his childhood hadn't been lonely.

'Honestly, I don't really welcome Sophia getting close to Charlotte...'

Sophia hadn't liked Charlotte from the start.

She knew that Charlotte had tried to steal Ian's Vladiark, and during the entrance examination, had even hired a mage to try getting Ian eliminated early.

But when Charlotte first came to the mansion as Ian's guest, Sophia tried hard not to show any displeasure and to be kind.

Then, as they spent more time together, she found Charlotte listened well, and as they talked more, Charlotte seemed to reflect on her own actions, even admitting they were foolish—and Sophia said she started becoming fond of her.

Sophia said it was only "a little," but with her, that might mean a lot.

Ian didn't like that much, but he also thought Sophia needed a female friend, so he didn't try to stop them from getting close.

'I just hope Sophia never gets betrayed by Charlotte from trusting her too much later on.'

Since Charlotte was someone who bowed to strength, as long as Ian kept climbing as a strong person, Charlotte would never dare betray Sophia, who was Ian's close companion.

— Swish! Swish!

Early in the morning, if he went out into the garden, he would always find Ophelia training alone.

"You're up, young master Ian."

"Sir Ophelia. You're diligent. The sun's barely risen."

"Well, my duty is to stick close to Lady Charlotte... I'm not complaining, but I only get personal time at this hour. Young master Ian, if it's all right, could I ask for a bout as well today?"

"Starting the day with a spar... Sounds good. I'd like to ask you for a bout today myself."

Thanks to Charlotte, Ian saw Ophelia every day and often exchanged swordplay with her.

— Clack! Clack!

— Tatata!

— Fwaah!

After a while, as the sounds of wooden swords clashing faded in the morning mist—

"Hoo..."

Ophelia wiped her sweat-drenched hair with a towel and spoke.

"Sparring with you is always astonishing, young master Ian. There's a poise you have that goes beyond your years. Each time, your swordplay surpasses my expectations. Honestly, I used to think hard work could get me anywhere, but watching your sword, I realize there really is such a thing as untouchable talent. You're not even fifteen, and fighting with you feels like sparring with a seasoned veteran. Haha."

"... You flatter me."

Ophelia wasn't wrong; Ian's experience was partly due to innate talent, but ninety-nine percent had come from clawing to survive his previous life.

He'd fought through two major wars, things many people never face once in a lifetime, and each time, he'd stood in the vanguard and fought until the bitter end.

Counting both lifetimes, he wasn't technically old enough to be called a veteran, but the density of his experience certainly surpassed one.

"Young master! Breakfast is ready!"

At that moment, Sophia called out, having finished preparing breakfast.

"Okay, I'm coming."

Ian sprang up and offered his hand to Ophelia, who was still seated.

"Let's go, sir Ophelia."

Ophelia took Ian's hand and stood.

"Thank you for always taking care of me as well."

"Of course. We live together now, after all."

"... Family..."

After Charlotte moved in, Ophelia ended up staying in the adjacent room.

While they lived together, they were nothing if not family.

After breakfast together, it was off to Sword Dragon Hall.

The daily routine at Sword Dragon Hall always began with theory classes in the lecture hall.

Yuria was always seated at the very back by the window.

"..."

When Ian made eye contact with Yuria, he could see her fingertip twitch a little, but she didn't wave.

Similarly, Ian only nodded slightly and sat in the middle of the classroom without greeting her.

'Haa...'

It was all because of Aris.

If Ian acted close to Yuria, Aris would surely find some vicious way to interfere.

There were eyes and ears everywhere in Sword Dragon Hall placed by Aris.

Even in this lecture hall, there were bound to be plenty of informants on Aris's payroll.

Both Yuria and Ian knew this, so they couldn't even properly greet each other.

To avoid provoking Aris...

That's why Ian had barely spoken to Yuria over the past two months.

He wanted to grow closer, to talk more, to become friends, but he couldn't do anything.

For the first few days after Sword Dragon Hall opened, they could just barely exchange secret notes, but soon surveillance devices were installed in every classroom and training hall, and Aris's eyes were everywhere on the way to and from class, so even exchanging notes became impossible.

'... This is so frustrating.'

What's worse, Yuria didn't get close to anyone else either.

That, too, was to keep from provoking Aris.

Yuria forming her own circle at Sword Dragon Hall would annoy Aris, and it would give her more weaknesses to exploit.

At the start of the semester, some students had tried to approach Yuria, but as she kept her distance, eventually no one tried to get close anymore.

'... Damn you, Aris.'

So Yuria spent the past two months with no friends, lonely in Sword Dragon Hall.

Ian, knowing how important friends are at that age, ground his teeth in frustration.

He'd wanted to give Yuria lots of good memories at Sword Dragon Hall, but now he could only watch her being isolated, all because of Aris.

'I have to grow strong enough to crush Aris as soon as possible.'

The elixir Millennium Golden Essence, awarded as the grand prize in the upcoming deserted island survival test, was the key.

'I'll use Authority of Projection to endlessly duplicate the Millennium Golden Essence and regain my former strength within this year.'

Once Ian reached his previous Swordmaster high-rank, combining the Frenzied Insight Style and his previous life's experience, he was confident he could at least keep up with Aris, if not overwhelm her.

And with Vladiark and Authority of Projection as well, he would surely gain a significant edge.

Aris might be a Supreme Grandmaster, but she was on the lower end of the scale, and she didn't possess any powers that defied common sense like Vladiark or Authority of Projection.

'Aris... Your reign over Sword Dragon Hall ends this year at the latest.'

The moment Ian regained his previous life's level, there would be no one in Sword Dragon Hall who could ever hold sway over him again.

# Chapter 82 : Deserted Island Survival (1)

Deserted Island Survival (1)

Time passed quickly, and before anyone knew it, it was late June.

A clear sky. The blazing summer sun shining down.

The deserted island survival test had begun.

—SPLAAASH!!

A massive ship cut through the calm sea as it advanced.

"All cadets! Attention, everyone!"

The senior instructor shouted from the broad deck.

"As you probably know, this test is practically real combat. On that deserted island, you'll find all kinds of vicious poisonous insects and beasts, itching to tear you apart. If you let your guard down, you could really die. Everyone stay sharp and brace yourselves."

Soon, the cadets would plunge into the wilds and experience true survival for themselves.

"Before we begin, I'll go over the rules and precautions one last time. This will be your final explanation, so focus."

The instructor explained the test rules and notes with precise diction.

"First, your goal is to survive on the deserted island for one week."

The cadets had to use everything they'd learned at Sword Dragon Hall: their knowledge, skills, self-sufficiency for food and tools, and safe shelter—everything to survive.

"Second, various treasures are hidden on the deserted island."

Finding treasures awarded bonus points.

Ten points for each magic orb. Two hundred points for each elixir.

Any treasures found could be kept by the cadet after the test ended.

You could use them yourself or sell them if you wanted, so they were rewards in their own right.

"Third, you are strictly forbidden to use aura for this exam."

Artifacts, external medicines, and magic scrolls brought from outside were of course also prohibited.

Even the swords received during the Sword Selection Ceremony could not be used.

Cadets had to rely solely on their physical capabilities and knowledge for this survival test.

"If caught cheating, you're immediately disqualified. And you will lose 5,000 points from your personal score."

A 5,000-point penalty was enough to get you expelled from Sword Dragon Hall—it was a serious loss. The third rule had to be followed without exception.

"Fourth, cooperation and competition between cadets are both allowed."

For this test, the social skills and leadership of each cadet would count toward their evaluation.

This gave a large advantage to young heirs of powerful families, but blending into those cliques and surviving was also considered a survival ability.

Of course, there was no limit on team size, even for cadets without powerful backgrounds. If you were skilled enough, you could even lead the entire cadet group yourself.

At the same time, competition was freely permitted.

"If you take another cadet's badge, you'll receive 200 bonus points for each one."

A cadet who lost their badge would be disqualified from the test, having failed to survive, and be scored a zero.

Treasures and competition were important, but if you failed to survive, everything would be for naught.

If you went after bonus points and ended up with a zero, there'd be nothing more frustrating.

Above all, in this test, the most important thing was personal survival.

"Fifth, each of you will be given a single flare."

If you became poisoned, gravely wounded, or isolated—any situation you absolutely could not handle on your own—you could use your flare at any time.

However, using the flare counted as failing to survive.

And since it meant giving up voluntarily, you'd be penalized 300 points from your personal score.

If your year-end grades at Sword Dragon Hall were lacking, you couldn't move up to the next class and could be expelled, so using your flare should only be a very last resort.

"That's all for the explanation."

With that, the instructor's briefing ended.

"We'll begin immediately. Cadets number 1 to 10! Board the boats marked with your number. Move!"

The first ten cadets in line boarded separate rowboats.

Entry order had been determined by lottery.

It was advantageous to enter the island early, to secure good spots and treasures, so these ten were the lucky ones.

'As for me...'

Ian's entry number was 278.

'Tsk.'

A very late slot.

'Not my lucky day.'

—SPLASH! SPLASH!

Ten rowboats pulled away, heading for the deserted island.

Those cadets would land at different points and begin their own survival challenge the moment they made landfall.

'... I'm worried about Sophia.'

Sophia's number was 132.

She was much earlier than Ian.

"..."

Ian looked toward the front of the line, where Sophia was seated.

"Young master!"

Sophia made eye contact with Ian, clenching her fists and giving him a big smile.

"Fighting!"

"..."

Even though real-life training was important for improving ability, Ian didn't want Sophia to get caught up with troublemakers or hurt herself picking the wrong wild plants.

And, above all else...

"Kehehehe..."

"Kuhehehe..."

Hector's gang, looking at Ian from the very front of the line, snickering to themselves.

He was extremely concerned they might mess with Sophia.

Not only that, but somehow they'd all ended up with low entry numbers as if they'd gamed the lottery.

Had they bribed the person in charge of the draw?

Using the Gold Hound family's influence?

They were always thuggish, but today that air was stronger than usual.

With the test starting, Ian was certain they'd go after Sophia, and when he reached the island, his first priority was to join her and eliminate them right away.

'Might as well take this chance to teach those bastards a proper lesson, too.'

He had endured their nasty stares for months since the start of term.

If they had more openly picked a fight, he would have smashed them already, but as it was he'd just put up with it.

'But for this test, I can finally hit them as much as I want.'

He figured Hector's gang was thinking the same thing and were eager for a chance to beat Ian to a pulp.

They apparently still held a serious grudge from the entrance exam.

Now they seemed ready to drag Sophia, his childhood friend, into it as revenge against Ian.

'Just the thought of it disgusts me.'

Ian planned to leave an indelible lesson all over Hector's gang's bodies this time.

Once they truly felt the difference, they'd keep to themselves.

Unless, that is, they wanted to get destroyed even worse in the next real combat test.

'After I'm done schooling those guys, I'll have to find Yuria.'

According to his memories from his previous life, nothing dangerous was supposed to happen to Yuria in this test; but with Aris as the new Sword Dragon Hall Lord, unexpected variables could appear at any time.

Aris was watching Ian from the ship, so he couldn't openly show any collaboration with Yuria. But at least he could check if Yuria was making it through the exam safely.

'But the biggest problem... is what kind of scheme Aris has set for this test.'

Aris had become Hall Lord solely out of her obsession with Ian.

She had even prepared the first-place reward for this test—a Millennium Golden Ginseng, exactly what Ian needed—to lure him here.

So, it was highly likely the deserted island was rigged with some scheme targeting Ian.

'What could Aris have prepared? Monsters? Assassins? Magic traps? Kidnapping? There are way too many possibilities to guess. But—'

Whatever Aris had up her sleeve, Ian had a trump card that could overcome anything.

Spatial storage magic, engraved in his body over a month of projection training. And the Vladiark stored inside.

On top of that, Ian's aura cultivation was now at the level of early-stage Swordmaster.

Even if a Grandmaster appeared right in front of him, Ian was confident his surprise attack would succeed.

'Let's do this.'

Ian's gaze grew cold.

Whatever appeared on the island, he was set on destroying it all.

* * *

—SPLASH!

—SHHHHH!

The rowboat carrying Ian reached the shore of the deserted island.

"Get out now, cadet Ian."

The instructor who had rowed him there wished him luck.

"Take care. See you in a week."

"Yes. Thank you."

The instructor rowed the boat back toward the ship.

'Alright... then.'

The first order of business was to find Sophia.

Yuria was basically the apex predator here, so she could be left alone for a bit. But leaving Sophia by herself, even briefly, with Hector's gang around, felt far too risky.

Ian was about to set off in search of Sophia when—

—KWA-BOOOOM!!

The ground shook violently, almost like a boulder had exploded.

"IIIIIAAAAAANNN!!!"

At the same time, a gigantic mass surged across the sky, flying like a siege engine's catapult shot.

"What the...?"

Ian stared blankly at the flying mass before instinctively rolling to the side.

—KABOOOM!!!

The lump crashed down exactly where Ian had just stood, making the sand erupt as if hit by a bomb.

"Cra—Crazy...!"

Barbarian Kuga.

The source was that mass, having leapt out of the forest.

"Ian! Warrior! The time has come! Let us settle this!"

"Haa..."

Ian looked around.

There was no other presence but Kuga.

"Don't tell me... you've been waiting here this whole time?"

There was no way Kuga could have greeted him the moment he arrived otherwise.

"That's right! I was watching from the tallest tree until you got here! I have waited for this day!"

"..."

The obsession of this muscle-bound giant...

It wasn't a welcome sort of fixation.

'And besides, I'm a bit busy right now.'

Ian did want to teach Kuga a lesson, but right now, the priority was to meet up with Sophia.

"Kuga. Do we really have to fight right now?"

"Of course! I won't back down this time! Ian!"

"How about you come with me for now instead? I'll fight you in a week."

He figured he could teach Kuga a lot tagging along together.

"You need points, right? If you pass out or lose your badge in a fight, you're scored zero."

But Kuga shook his head.

"I refuse! The only thing I want is to compete with you! Right now!"

"... Stubborn, aren't you."

Ian smacked his lips with a bitter face.

"In that case, I guess it can't be helped."

—Flick.

Ian snapped his fingers.

"Come at me, then. Kuga."

He'd just finish this quickly and go find Sophia.

"OOOOOOOHH!!! That's just like you—WARRIOR! IAN!"

Kuga roared, swelling every muscle in his body.

—CRACK! CRACK!

A physique no one would believe came from a fourteen-year-old.

—TWITCH! TWITCH!

Veins rose on his muscles, writhing like serpents.

He was less like a human than a monster.

Kuga had the body of a barbarian capable of ripping apart bears.

'As expected... Kuga is special even among Barbarians.'

Despite being only fourteen, his muscles rivaled most adult barbarians.

'Tsk.'

In contrast, Ian's body was still small and scrawny compared to Kuga.

He'd finally started to add some muscle from training, but next to Kuga's brute frame, Ian looked like a toothpick.

'Normally, there's no way I'd win against him without aura or a sword.'

No fourteen-year-old, no matter how much they worked out, could beat a bear.

But—

—《Authority of Projection》—

◆Traits

[Orc's Strength Lv.15], [Ghoul's Strength Lv.28], [Gargoyle's Strength Lv.36], [Abomination's Strength Lv.57], [Barbarian Warlord's Strength Lv.72]……

———————

Thanks to the Authority of Projection, Ian had accumulated strength traits bit by bit.

He had already fully manifested all of them, so they were constantly active even without aura.

Moreover, Ian's physique had been strengthened by the Darkan's Heavenly Blood Pill—it was no ordinary boy's body now.

'Someone like Kuga... I could play with him like a teddy bear.'

Briefly, Ian wondered, 'Did Aris set him up for me?'

Wanting to see how he'd handle a Barbarian without aura or Vladiark?

'If that's the case, this test will be extremely easy.'

Someone like Kuga, Ian could end instantly without even revealing anything.

If Aris ever asked how he defeated a barbarian with such a feeble body, he could just claim it was the elixir's effect.

"I'll fight with my life on the line!! IAN!!"

—KABOOOM!

Kuga charged, exploding the ground like a cannon.

"Alright. Let's finish this quickly—no time to lose."

—SWOOSH!

Ian also leaped toward Kuga, both feet launching off the earth.

—THUD! THUD! THUD! THUD!

Kuga barreled in with the force of a boulder tumbling down a mountain.

—STEP! STEP! STEP! STEP!

On the other hand, Ian's steps were small and light.

Anyone watching would say Ian would be crushed in a head-on collision.

And yet—

—KABOOOOM!!!

The giant and the boy collided dead on with a thunderous boom.

"..."

"KU—KUHHHACK!!!"

The one utterly crushed and sent flying—was Kuga.

# Chapter 83 : Deserted Island Survival (2)

Deserted Island Survival (2)

— KWA-A-A-AANG!!!

As the Barbarian and the boy collided head-on, a thunderous roar struck the deserted island's beach.

"Keu, keuhuk!!"

Ian's fist landed squarely on Kuga's jaw.

— KUUUUNG!

Kuga's massive figure floated momentarily in the air, then crashed into the sandy beach with a heavy thud.

"Uh, uhh...!?"

Kuga, sprawled on the sand, opened his eyes wide.

'What kind of punching power is this...!?'

He had let his guard down because of Ian's small frame.

He'd seen the punch coming, but figured a small fist like that couldn't possibly hurt much and just took the hit.

Rather than dodging or blocking, he intended to endure it with his weight class and then pin Ian down to subdue him.

But—

"U, uweoh...!"

When he came to after being hit, he realized he was already lying on the ground.

Even now, his vision was spinning dizzily.

"K, keuhk!"

A blow so staggering, it was hard to believe it came from a boy's fist.

Even if he'd been struck by a full-grown bull, he wouldn't have been taken down so helplessly.

"Keeuuu...!"

However, Kuga was the most promising warrior of his tribe.

He was shocked by Ian's heavy punch, but had no intention of surrendering just because he'd been hit once.

Kuga forced his wobbling limbs to move, struggling desperately to get up.

But—

"As expected, you're getting back up."

Ian had no intention of letting Kuga stand again.

"Typical Barbarians."

— BAAAAK!!

Ian's kick drove deep into Kuga's face just as he barely managed to straighten his back.

"Keu, keuheok!"

Like being struck by a horse's hoof, Kuga's head snapped back hard.

But the opponent was a Barbarian gifted with monstrous strength—a natural-born physical genius, at that.

This much wasn't enough to knock him out.

So—

— CHUK!

Ian-nimbly mounted Kuga as he fell.

A mount position.

"It, it's not over yet...!"

Kuga, forcing strength into his blurring eyes, tried to push Ian off.

"Of course. Far from over, isn't it?"

Ian pressed Kuga's arms down with his knees, thoroughly blocking any chance of counterattack.

Barbarian warriors—especially ones like Kuga with tenacity and persistence—would keep coming endlessly unless killed outright or knocked unconscious.

Ian had fought this type countless times in his previous life, so he showed no mercy.

— BAK! BAK! BAK! BAK!

Ian's sturdy fists pummeled Kuga's jaw in rapid succession.

"Ugh! Uhak! Keok! Keukh!"

Kuga groaned in rhythm, as if being struck like a percussion instrument.

Kuga's jaw was as hard as iron.

— BANG! KWANG! KWANG! BANG!

But Ian's fists were relentless, like a blacksmith's hammer.

"Keu! Keok! Wa, wait! Keuak!"

Even Kuga's iron jaw began to crack under Ian's seasoned fists.

"Uuueck...!"

— CHUWK!

Soon Kuga's eyes rolled back completely as his body went limp.

"Whew."

Ian's fist stopped just under Kuga's chin.

"You really are sturdy."

Honestly, Ian hadn't planned to hit him this much.

But since Kuga showed no signs of fainting, Ian had gradually increased his strength, bringing out more than half his full power before felling him.

If Kuga were an ordinary human, his jaw would've been shattered—his whole face would've become pulp.

Kuga's bones and muscles were so sturdy that, despite taking so many punches, a few fractures were the worst of it.

Such injuries could be healed quickly by the healers waiting on the ship.

— FLASH!

At that moment, a jewel set in Kuga's belt glowed red.

It was a biosignal detection device provided for this exam.

The red light meant he was unconscious.

An instructor nearby would soon come to recover Kuga.

"Well then..."

— ZZIIIK!

Ian gently detached Kuga's name tag from his chest.

This secured him an extra 200 points.

He checked Kuga's breathing and pulse, then stood up.

'Did that take about five minutes?'

He'd thought it would be over in three, but Kuga was sturdier than expected, so it took a bit longer.

— TUK TUK!

Ian brushed the sand off his pants and walked into the forest.

Now it was time to find Sophia again.

* * *

A ship circling near the deserted island.

"Wha—Wh—My goodness..."

"He overwhelmed Cadet Kuga... so utterly..."

The instructors in the control room stared at the magic screen in awe.

On the magic screen, Kuga was shown collapsed on the beach.

The white waves constantly washed over his body under the blazing sun.

Ian had already disappeared into the forest and was out of sight.

"Cadet Ian did receive the Heavenly Blood Pill from the Heavenly Sword Lord, but still... like this..."

"This isn't even a contest. Kuga couldn't put up a fight."

"Is Cadet Ian just that amazing, or is the Heavenly Blood Pill that amazing...?"

"Probably both."

Kuga, in terms of sheer physical prowess, was a once-in-a-generation powerhouse, surpassing even Yuria's natural-born talent.

At fourteen, he boasted physical ability greater than an adult Barbarian, and could crush rocks with his bare hands without aura.

This exam prohibited the use of aura, and sword spirits weren't allowed either, so the instructors were sure Kuga would take first place.

This class's children were, at most, fourteen to sixteen years old.

How could anyone, without aura or sword techniques, hope to defeat Kuga, who was stronger than an adult Barbarian?

So they had thought.

Yet Kuga was utterly defeated and thoroughly subdued by Ian in just five minutes.

"Was there any aura reaction from Cadet Ian?"

The cadet's belts detected not only vital signs but aura usage as well.

If a cadet used aura, the control room would know immediately.

But there was no reaction showing on the panel next to the screen.

"No aura was detected whatsoever. Cadet Ian subdued Cadet Kuga with pure strength and technique."

"Unbelievable... Among the Barbarians I've seen in my fifteen years, Kuga was top tier. You rarely see someone so naturally built, even among Barbarians."

"Cadet Ian isn't just one of the top contenders. He's completely outside the realm of common sense."

"Wow... to do that with such a small body... Is the effect of the Heavenly Blood Pill really that extreme?"

"No. Even before getting the Heavenly Blood Pill, cadet Ian already overwhelmed Lady Yuria. Defeating Kuga isn't just about the pill."

"That's why the Heavenly Sword Lord is keeping an eye on him."

"Haaa. Cadet Ian's future is dazzling. I can see his bright future as plain as day."

"Damn. I'm truly envious."

The control room buzzed with the instructors' admiration.

"Hmm..."

And, at the highest seat in the control room.

A woman sat on a luxurious, plush throne.

Aris Hisperion.

"Hoo..."

She, too, though not showing it outwardly, was quietly excited by Ian's achievement, just as the instructors were.

'He took down Kuga, even without aura... That alone is amazing. And yet, he makes it look like it's nothing.'

Even though Ian once had a record of defeating Dellen, a early-stage Swordmaster, at that time he could use both aura and a sword.

Beating a Barbarian with overwhelming size and strength without either was an entirely different matter.

It was astonishing—a remarkable performance.

'But this is only the beginning.'

Aris licked her lower lip, manipulating the personal screen on her desk.

The screen switched to show Ian making his way through the forest.

Expectation slowly deepened in her gaze.

'I have plenty more presents prepared for you. I can't wait to see what new tricks you'll show me.'

Kuga was just an appetizer Aris had prepared.

Soon, he'd face Hector's gang and put on another entertaining show.

"Hoho..."

How would Ian break through that?

What wild, ingenious moves would he show next?

Aris took full pleasure in every possibility Ian could reveal.

'I'll keep watching you and only you. Ian Greysel.'

* * *

— SHARAK! SHARARAK!

The sound of cadet uniforms brushing through thick grass.

"Aww... Did I take the wrong path?"

Sophia cautiously pushed through the dense greenery.

— CHIRP CHIRP!

Birdsong filled the air, and sunlight streamed through the leafy forest, which seemed peaceful and tranquil, but you never knew when danger would spring from anywhere.

"Huh?"

Then, something sparkling caught Sophia's eye as she busily scanned her surroundings.

"Wow, this is...!"

She stopped walking and bent down.

There, between broad leaves, was a small flower emitting a gentle light.

A bud with a pale violet glow.

"It's Purple Herb!"

Purple Herb.

It was an elixir she'd studied with Ian when learning about herbs.

The bigger the bud, the better the quality. This one was impressively large—a top-tier specimen among the best.

"Woo, Woo-hoo!"

Sophia couldn't hold back her delight and let out an excited sound.

She knelt quickly and carefully uprooted the herb, roots and all.

The purple bud swayed in her palm.

Sophia beamed as she gazed at the Purple Herb.

"Lucky me!"

I'll give this to Young Master Ian when I see him!

He'll be so happy!

As she delighted in this pleasant thought, admiring the bud—

"...!"

Suddenly, a chill ran down her spine.

'This is...!'

A vivid killing intent. The direction—right behind her.

"Hik!"

Her instincts screamed sharply in warning.

Sophia reflexively rolled her body.

— SHWEAAAACK!!

Almost simultaneously, a wooden club tore through the air, narrowly grazing the back of her head.

"W-What!?"

Rolling on the dirt left her quickly covered in dust.

Gathering herself, Sophia glared at the person who'd swung the club.

"Well... You managed to dodge that?"

A languid voice, and then a tall boy emerged from the shadows.

Sharp eyes. A sneering, wicked grin at his lips.

He was Jacob, Hector's gang's number two.

"Your reflexes are quicker than I thought."

"No kidding."

The surrounding vegetation rustled as others began to appear, one by one.

All of them gripped heavy clubs and sharp stones.

Their eyes glittered like predators hunting prey.

"Wh-What...!"

Sophia got to her feet in a hurry, unconsciously stepping backward.

But Hector's gang closed in from all sides.

She might have stood a chance one-on-one, but there was no way she could handle all of them alone.

If possible, her best bet was to run immediately...

But they'd already surrounded her completely...

Could she escape?

"Ugh..."

She kept retreating, feeling more and more helpless.

A few more steps back and something tapped her back.

"Oops."

A cruel, sneering voice came from right behind her.

She whipped around in alarm.

"Watch where you're walking, Sophia Marygold. Because of you, my clothes got dirty."

There stood Hector, bearing a vicious smile.

"Uh, uhh...!"

Sophia hastily tried to put distance between them.

But she couldn't get far.

Hector's gang had blocked every escape route.

Like a rabbit caught hopelessly in a trap.

"Wh-What are you going to do!?"

Sophia forced out the words.

But Hector and his gang only closed in, not bothering to answer.

What shone in their eyes was not simple competitiveness.

It was a deeper malice. And a base desire.

"U-uhh...!"

Feeling the chilling malice, every hair on Sophia's body stood on end.

Surrounded in an instant by a pack of wolves—

The Purple Herb clutched tightly in her hand trembled faintly.

# Chapter 84 : Deserted Island Survival (3)

Deserted Island Survival (3)

— Rustle! Rustle! Rustle-rustle!

"Hehehe..."

"Kukuku..."

The sinister laughter of Hector's gang as they slowly approached.

The clubs and sharp stones in their hands gleamed ominously in the shade.

"Ugh...!"

Sophia gritted her teeth, clutching the purple herb tightly in her hand.

She hurriedly looked around, but found no gap through which she could escape.

"Oh? You even brought an elixir. Sophia."

Hector licked his lips as he eyed the purple herb.

Greed blazed in both his eyes.

"Hand that over, for starters."

The elixir was worth points.

He planned to beat Sophia to a pulp soon, but it would be a problem if the elixir got damaged.

"No way!"

Of course, there was no way Sophia would hand over the purple herb willingly.

Glaring fiercely, she tucked the herb into her bosom.

"This is for Young Master Ian!"

"...?"

— Crack!

At the mention of that annoying gray-head, Hector's brow contorted violently.

"You'd better start acting a little smarter, Sophia. I'm giving you a chance here. If you listen well, maybe we'll just let you go?"

Of course, this was a lie.

Even if Sophia got down on her knees and begged for her life, Hector had no intention of letting her go.

'I've been waiting for this moment for so long. I'm going to end things once and for all today.'

It wasn't that he held any personal grudge against Sophia.

But to her close friend, Ian, he owed a debt.

During the entrance examination, Ian had disgraced Hector miserably in front of everyone.

Because of that bastard, everything Hector had prepared for that day went up in smoke, his grades were ruined, and, back home, he became the laughingstock of his brother and father.

He was determined to repay that debt right here.

He wanted to make sure that Ian would never dare stand up to him again, would fear Hector and offer up everything of his own accord.

He would show Ian—plainly—just what he was capable of.

'First, let's secure Sophia.'

He planned to use her as a hostage and threaten Ian.

Surrender quietly and obey our demands, or else I break Sophia's fingers one by one.

From months of observing Ian and Sophia, Hector knew that the two cared for each other deeply, so Ian would have no choice but to yield to Hector's demands.

'And if Ian surrenders? Then it's over. All I have to do is enjoy it.'

If Ian surrendered, Hector was going to tie him to a tree and torture him.

Fingers, teeth, forearms, legs, eyes—which could leave permanent damage—and even the mana circuit.

He would break, tear, stab, and crush.

After making a complete mess of Ian—

He planned to ruin Sophia in front of Ian's very eyes.

Utterly shattering both his body and mind so that he'd never even dream of resisting again.

'And the finale. At the very end...'

He will force Ian to draw out his aura, making him fail the test.

Any student who used aura in this test would lose a whopping 5,000 points from their individual score.

5,000 points was practically a guaranteed fail at the Sword Dragon Hall.

This was the perfect opportunity for Hector to get his revenge for the entrance exam, disgrace that detestable gray-haired bastard, and even expel him from the Sword Dragon Hall.

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to release all his pent-up grievances at once.

'Bribing the instructors went smoothly, too.'

The instructors supervising this area would turn a blind eye to Hector's torture.

He had used the influence of the Goldhound family to bribe them as well.

He had already instructed them not to intervene under any circumstances, no matter what happened here.

'Ian Greysel... I don't care if you're favored by the Heavenly Sword Lord or if you're a genius who overwhelms Yuria—I couldn't care less about that.'

Anyone who opposed him was simply an enemy to be utterly crushed.

And the Goldhound family's way was to seize any chance to bite down and finish off their enemies without hesitation.

"I said, hand it over already! Can't you see your situation?"

"Piss off! This belongs to Young Master Ian!"

"..."

Hector closed his mouth, his expression ice-cold.

Sophia only glared back at him with eyes full of hostility.

It looked like this woman had no intention at all of handing over the elixir.

'Even a lowly commoner dares...! To look down on me...?'

A vein bulged from Hector's temple.

"Fine... then try your best not to break it."

Hector gestured.

"Get her."

"Haha!"

"Finally!"

The instant Hector's order rang out, one of his thugs rushed Sophia.

"Die!"

— Swish!

A club flew toward the back of Sophia's head.

"Gasp!"

Sophia barely managed to dodge by ducking her head.

The club swept past her hair with a gust of wind, missing her by a hair's breadth.

"Get lost!"

Sophia twisted her waist, driving an elbow into the thug's exposed side.

"Urgh!"

Having taken a solid hit to the ribs, the thug gasped for breath and staggered.

Sophia didn't miss the opening and followed up with a punch.

Recalling the martial techniques she'd learned from Ian.

A focused blow with her core strength, striking the opponent's chin.

— Whack!

"Gwah!"

With a resounding blow, the thug's head snapped to the side.

— Stagger! Stagger!

— Plop!

After stumbling a few steps, the thug collapsed onto the dirt.

"Whew!"

Sophia let out a short breath and shook off her fist.

It was her first time using that technique in real combat, but it landed far more accurately than expected.

It was the first real payoff from all the training she'd done with Ian.

"W-What...?"

"Timothy went down in one hit...!"

Just moments ago, Hector's gang had been flaunting their bravado, but now their faces froze in shock.

Seeing one of their own fall so easily, they suddenly recoiled in fright, instinctively shrinking back.

'Looks like these guys really underestimated me.'

From their expressions, they hadn't expected Sophia to be able to take down one of them so easily.

'I haven't been wasting my time either.'

Ever since joining the Sword Dragon Hall, Sophia had been getting extra lessons from Ian every single day.

With personalized instruction from the top-tier instructor Ian, Sophia had rapidly and efficiently improved, already surpassing beginner-level in most techniques, and she'd always been stronger than her peers to begin with.

'If the rest of them are about the same as him, maybe I can handle two at once...'

But the real problem was the numbers.

'There are too many.'

A total of 12.

After taking one down, 11 remained.

'No matter how I look at it, escaping is the smartest plan right now.'

But still, she saw no way out.

"Y-You bitch! Why are you all just standing there!?"

At that moment, the number two of Hector's gang, Jacob, barked sharply.

"Everyone rush at her together! Don't give her a chance to resist! Just smash her!"

"Yeah! Yeah!"

"Go for the head!"

"Just beat her anywhere!"

Hector's gang charged from all directions at once.

"Kh...!"

Sophia clenched her fists and took a guard stance, grinding her teeth.

'I'm screwed!'

This was a situation that couldn't be overcome by willpower or endurance alone.

But even so—

'I'll at least take three of them with me!'

She couldn't just surrender to this rabble trying to steal the purple herb meant for Young Master Ian.

Just as she resolved herself and swung her fist at her assailants—

"Stoppppp—!!!"

A booming, dignified voice thundered from above, in the trees.

"Ugh!?"

"What the—!?"

The voice was so loud everyone's bodies froze for a moment.

Everyone unconsciously looked up at the trees.

— Rustle! Rustle!

"Hmph! You insolent fools! Do you know who you're trying to mess with?!"

Brilliant golden hair fluttered in the wind. Eyes full of overwhelming force.

The fifth child and third daughter of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Charlotte Hisperion.

Arms crossed loftily, she looked down on Hector's gang.

"Ugh...!"

"W-What the...!"

Hector's gang looked up at Charlotte, their faces ashen.

To discover that not only did Sophia possess unexpected skill, but now even a direct descendant of the Heavenly Sword Lord was showing up.

— Rustle! Rustle!

"You riff-raff! If any of you move another step, I'll kill you!"

Charlotte radiated a presence worthy of a direct descendant of the Heavenly Sword Lord—brimming with authority.

With her arms folded proudly, she appeared like the very master of the forest.

"Ugh...!"

Intimidated, Hector's minions hesitated, not knowing what to do.

"L-Lady Charlotte!"

Sophia called out, her voice laced with relief.

"Sophia! You can relax now!"

Charlotte jumped down from the tree.

She landed right in front of Sophia.

Standing protectively in front of Sophia, she declared,

"How dare you touch my friend? And with several men against a woman?! Have you no shame?!"

"M-Milady...!"

"Haa... Lady Charlotte."

Hector stepped forward, rubbing his forehead.

"I didn't expect you to get involved."

His voice was steeped in mockery.

"I heard you've been doing servile tasks at Ian's estate. Haha. Seems you're really cut out for it, even playing bodyguard for commoners."

"... Are you trying to insult me?"

"Pardon?"

Hector's mocking sneer deepened.

"Of course. It's rather pathetic to see, you know. Have you forgotten your station as a direct descendant? Looks like you've pledged yourself to Ian? You're practically his knight! Quite fitting, Dame Charlotte."

"Kh...! You bastard!!"

"There's no reason for you all to be nervous,"

Hector addressed his gang.

"This woman was kicked out of the annex anyway. All we have to do is teach her a lesson and drive her away."

"You bastard...!"

A chill swept across Charlotte's eyes.

"Then show me what you've got!"

— Zing!

In an instant, Charlotte charged Hector.

"...!"

As expected of a direct Hisperion line with Heavenly Blood coursing through her veins, her speed was sharp and fast.

The speed unleashed from those superhuman muscles was like an arrow.

"Gh...!?"

Hector hurriedly swung his club, but Charlotte was already within his guard.

— Thud!

Charlotte's fist landed deep in Hector's abdomen.

"Guh!"

Hector bent over with a gasp.

It didn't feel like a punch but like he'd been stabbed with an awl.

Without pausing, Charlotte kneed him in the chin.

— Crack!

"Guk!"

Hector's head snapped back.

The world spun as if struck by a hammer.

Hector staggered—

— Thump!

—and landed on his backside.

Blood dripped from the corner of Hector's lips.

"Kh, khh...! You bitch...!"

"What, that's all you've got?"

Charlotte covered her mouth, laughing coldly.

"Where did all that bravado from earlier go? Isn't this disgraceful for the Goldhound family? Puhuhu!"

"Y-You...!"

Hector glared at her murderously, struggling to his feet.

But Charlotte was already moving on to her next attack.

— Swish!

She grabbed Hector by the collar, twisted, and smashed him to the ground.

— Thud!

"Argh!"

Hector crashed into the dirt. His cronies recoiled in shock.

"W-What...!"

"Even young master Hector went down that easily...?!"

Sophia stared at Charlotte, eyes wide with disbelief.

'Miss Lottie is this strong!?'

It was the first time Sophia saw Charlotte like this—so overwhelmingly dominant.

Back at Lunabreeze, she'd never had the chance to witness Charlotte's full strength.

Even during the occasional practice at Sword Dragon Hall, Charlotte had never gone all out.

The moment Charlotte got riled up by Hector's provocation, Sophia had tried to jump in as well, but seeing Charlotte's display, she felt she'd only get in the way.

"Keep strutting, Hector. Hm? Go on, let's see more."

Charlotte looked down at Hector and raised her fist again.

Just as she was about to finish Hector off with a final blow—

"You bitch—!!!"

— Fwoooosh!!

Golden light exploded from Hector's body.

Lottie redeemed herself a bit...

She might have instinctively known that she has to protect Sophia if she want to get on Ian's good graces..

# Chapter 85 : Deserted Island Survival (4)

Deserted Island Survival (4)

— Paaaaaaah!!

A golden light erupted from Hector's body.

"W-what!?"

Charlotte, who had been pinning him down, jumped back in surprise.

'W-what is this!?'

It wasn't aura.

If it had been aura, the detection device attached to Hector's belt would have sounded the elimination signal.

'.....!'

It was a force far more primal, wild, and fierce than aura.

A single word flashed through Charlotte's mind like a bolt of lightning.

"N-no way!"

An astonished voice burst from her lips.

"Is this... Goldhound Transformation!?"

The forbidden secret technique of the Goldhound family.

It was a skill that summoned the power of the family's founder and divine beast—the Gold Hound—by drawing on their blood, granting ferocious strength.

'Hector can use Goldhound Transformation!? Already!?'

Hector was only fourteen years old.

Even as a direct heir of Goldhound, it was a precocious age to awaken Goldhound Transformation.

To properly wield the Gold Hound's power, one needed a body trained to withstand the strain of beastification, and a strong mind to control the bloodlust.

'But Hector has neither!'

Hector was certainly bigger and more robust than his peers, but he was still no match for a trained adult swordsman.

Moreover, in Charlotte's eyes, Hector's mental fortitude was practically trash.

'Damn it... But how!?'

How could this worthless thug manage to manifest the Goldhound family's ultimate secret, the Goldhound Transformation, already!

— Grrrrrr...!

'Charlotte...! You damn bitch...!!'

Growling, Hector slowly rose to his feet.

'Because of you my whole plan is ruined! Shit!!! I was saving Goldhound Transformation for Ian!!'

Just as Charlotte saw, Hector was not yet in a state where he could properly control Goldhound Transformation.

His body was not trained enough to withstand the strain, and he had no mental strength to command the beast's instinct.

So he had saved this move to use only once in the most crucial moment.

His plan was to use the Gold Hound's blood to subdue Ian should he resist when Hector used Sophia as a hostage.

But Charlotte's interference threw everything off.

Her attacks and provocations sent his blood boiling, and in the end, she ignited the core of his Gold Hound blood.

'I went through so much to gather Gold Hound blood for this day...!!'

In truth, manifesting Goldhound Transformation didn't strictly require bodily training or spiritual refinement.

Those were merely foundations for control.

Actual manifestation was possible as long as one had thick enough Goldhound blood.

But Hector was only fourteen. No matter how direct the lineage, it was too early an age for his body to contain highly concentrated Gold Hound blood.

So Hector gathered blood from collateral relatives.

The night before the test, he injected himself with a distilled essence of Gold Hound blood, refined from their contributions, sharpening his blade of revenge.

He thickened the concentration of Gold Hound blood in his veins, making it so he could draw on beastly power at the slightest stimulation.

'Krrrrrr.....!'

This was blatant doping.

A fraudulent act using external alchemical substances.

However, blood transfusion alone would never be caught by a doping test.

Moreover, many of the instructors overseeing this deserted island test were under the influence of Goldhound family's money and power.

There was no way Hector's cheating would be discovered.

'Kr...! Charlotte...!'

Power that he had prepared so thoroughly was blown in vain—all because of Charlotte.

'I'll make you regret ruining my plan...down to your bones...!'

— Crack! Crunch!

"Krrrrraaaaah...!!"

Hector surrendered himself fully to Goldhound Transformation.

"Kraaaaaaaaaaah!!"

— Snap! Crunch!

The wounds Charlotte had inflicted began to heal rapidly.

At the same time, his body twisted grotesquely.

His whole body swelled up, golden fur sprouting out.

His muzzle snapped forward with a crunch, and his fangs grew until they jutted out past his lips.

His golden irises enlarged, soon swallowing up all the whites of his eyes.

His breath grew animalistic, and saliva dripped down his lips—he looked every bit the starving beast.

"Uaaaaaaaah!!"

But it was an incomplete beastification.

"W-what is that!? It's disgusting!!"

Sophia shrieked in horror.

His snout had only partially emerged, the fur grown sparsely over half his body.

He looked as though an ape was stuck midway through evolution.

— Grrrrrrrrr...!

Still, the power he drew up was real.

Even if he faced off against that barbarian, couga, he wouldn't lose out now.

'Grrrrr...! I don't care about the details anymore. Those two will meet their end here!'

Now that Goldhound Transformation was released, Hector couldn't return to normal until all this beast energy was expelled.

Had he trained his mind, he might have suppressed it at will, but Hector lacked even that much willpower.

The longer the transformation lasted, the greater the burden on his body.

Worse yet, since he had forced this state through overwhelming power rather than mental strength, the time he could hold onto reason was extremely short.

In short—if Hector didn't vent this savagery quickly, he would have to pay a terrible price.

As time passed, his body and mind would crumble, and in the worst case, he could be eliminated immediately or suffer permanent aftereffects from the test.

'No time! I need to deal with that blonde bitch right now!'

— Paah!

Hector thundered into the ground.

The golden ape tore forward, the earth yielding as if it were butter.

— Screech!

The massive body surged with a speed that didn't fit its size.

"Wh-what!?"

As Hector charged, Charlotte instinctively raised both arms.

A solid guard to brace for the beast's blow.

But—

— Slash!

What flew at her wasn't a fist but claws.

Hector's razor-sharp nails sliced across both of Charlotte's arms as he passed.

"Aaagh!"

Crimson blood erupted from Charlotte's forearms.

A deep wound.

Droplets splattered thickly across the ground.

"L-Lady Lottie!"

"I-I'm fine!"

Sophia screamed and started rushing over, but Charlotte held up a hand to stop her.

"Stay back! Sophia! H-hah!"

Catching her breath, Charlotte steadied her stance to face Hector again.

But Hector was already launching a kick from her blind spot.

"What!?"

— Thud!

Hector's claws struck deep into her torso.

"Urgh! Ugh!"

—Urk!

Charlotte vomited her breakfast with blood as she dropped to her knees.

—Grab!

Hector savagely seized her by the hair as she knelt.

"Kuhuhuhuh...!! Charlotte! You arrogant bitch! Act all haughty again, let's see you try it! Charlotte! Come on, act tough one more time!!"

Hector's voice was a grotesque blend of excitement and savagery.

"Ugh... Uurgh!"

"Stop it!"

Sophia grabbed a stone and ran at him.

She meant to smash it over Hector's head to save Charlotte.

But—

"Oi! Where do you think you're going!"

Jacob, the number two thug in Hector's posse, grabbed Sophia.

"Eek!"

He wrenched her arm, throwing her to the ground.

—Thump!

"S-Sophia...!"

Charlotte groaned her name in agony.

"Urgh...urgh!"

—Rip!

Charlotte twisted desperately, almost tearing out her hair, but Hector easily neutralized her resistance with a stronger grip.

"GRRRRAAAAA!!"

Seeing Charlotte writhe and squirm unleashed the frenzy in Hector, causing him to howl.

He slammed his fist deeply into Charlotte's stomach once more.

—Whack! Thud! Thud!

The heavy blows echoed through the forest.

"Urgh! Ack! Gak!"

Charlotte collapsed, unable even to breathe.

Her body shuddered with pain.

"U-urgh!"

She vomited blood again.

—Whip!

Hector glanced down at her with satisfaction, then shook his head to dispel his bestial urges and turned away from Charlotte.

"Grrrrr!"

He raised his claws and approached Sophia.

Now it was time to deal with Sophia.

"Krk! Grrr!"

He could feel the time his rationality would last was quickly running out.

Hector knelt on one knee and seized Sophia's head by the hair as she lay pinned.

—Shing!

He pressed his razor-sharp claw against Sophia's soft, rounded cheek.

"Grrrrrr...!!"

He'd better hurry—should he start by gouging out an eye?

A wicked smile twisted on Hector's lips.

Even if she got treated, losing an eye would leave a permanent mark.

It was the perfect way to plunge Ian into despair.

"L-let go! Let go!!"

Sophia struggled, but Jacob's weight held her down—her resistance was futile.

"Heeek!?"

As the claw drew closer, rage in Sophia's eyes was quickly overtaken by terror.

"Krrrrrr... No, no...! Sophiaaaa!"

Charlotte crawled desperately across the ground.

But her guts were practically destroyed, her body refused to listen.

Her arms and legs thrashed, but only scratched the dirt.

—Ssst!

"Eek! Eeeek!! Young Master!! Young Master Ian!!!"

Sophia cried out, and Hector burst into a mad cackle.

"Grrr! Right...! Bark! Shout that bastard's name! Bark for me! Kehehe, hahahaha!!"

His claw drew ever closer to Sophia's eye.

Sharp talons about to gouge into her eyeball—

— Clack.

Someone took a firm grip on Hector's fingers.

The grip was cold.

"Krk?"

Hector turned his head.

He saw a face achingly familiar.

A calm boy with gray hair.

Ian Greysel was crouched at his side.

"Who do you think you're pointing that at?"

—Crunch!!!

A crisp sound of something breaking resounded.

"Krk!?"

A burning agony exploded from his fingers; looking down, he belatedly registered pain.

"GRRRRAAAAAAA!!!"

Hector's fingers were snapped and torn, like crab legs breaking apart.

Meat protruded from the joints like crab meat, quickly dyed bright red with blood.

Hector clutched his ruined hand and screamed.

Because he had tensed his muscles, the pain was doubled.

"Keugh!"

But even that scream didn't last a second.

Ian had instantly wrapped his arm around Hector's throat in a chokehold.

"Ku, keuk!"

Ian's forearm locked around Hector's neck like a noose.

"Grrrk!"

Hector clawed desperately at Ian's arm with razor-sharp nails.

–Clack! Crack!

But with Ian's forearms shielded by layers of tough bark, it was meaningless resistance.

–Squeeze!

"Ka—kek?!"

Ian's grip tightened, crushing Hector's throat more and more.

Hector's eyes fluttered, rolling backward.

Then, at last.

–Crack!

"Kek!?"

Bones twisted sickeningly; Hector's neck went limp.

His neck had been broken.

–Thud!

Ian threw Hector's body onto the ground, setting off convulsions through Hector like a seizure.

–Twitch! Twitch!

It was a spasm caused by a twisted nervous system.

It had taken only five seconds.

"C-crazy!!?"

"H-he killed him...!? Did he really kill him!?"

"Wha—what! Young Master Ian!!"

"……!"

Everyone present was stunned, friend and foe alike.

Not only Hector's gang, but even Sophia and Charlotte stared at Ian with dropped jaws.

"……"

But there was not an ounce of regret or panic in Ian's eyes.

He simply bore the look of someone who had done what needed to be done.

That gaze now turned coldly toward his next targets.

"G-gasp! H-he's crazy! That bastard...!!"

"He really killed him!"

"Is he going to kill us too!?"

"R-run! We have to run!"

"Aaagh!"

Hector's gang stumbled backward in terror.

More than half of them had already been humiliated by Ian's overwhelming skills during the entrance exam.

Now, fear engraved in their bodies was joined by real fear of death—there was no way they'd be able to muster any fighting spirit.

Their clubs and stones dropped heavily to the ground.

"Aaaaaaah!!"

As soon as one kid turned and bolted,

"Aaaaaah!"

"Aaagh! Spare me!"

"I don't want to die!"

"Instructor! Please! Somebody help us!"

As if on cue, the others scattered in all directions, running for their lives.

Screaming, Hector's gang fled every which way.

But Ian wasn't planning to let them go.

"You're not going anywhere."

Not a single one—he'd let none of them off easily.

They'd touched Sophia; he'd teach them what that cost.

–Swish!

Ian dashed forward.

"Aaaagh!"

First, the closest one.

Ian's foot struck out at the boy.

–Thud!

"Aaaagh!"

With a blow to the back of the knee, the boy fell, clutching his leg.

Next, the others, in order of proximity.

–Thump! Whack! Crack!

Back of the head, achilles' tendon, lower back—

"Aaagh! Aaargh!"

"Stop! Stop! Please! Aaaah!"

"Spare me! Spare me!"

Ian's fists and kicks struck true at every vital spot.

With a single blow, a goon fell each time.

It took less than twenty seconds for all of them to be left groaning and crawling across the muddy earth.

"M-my leg! It's...broken... Aaagh!"

"Groooooan..."

"Gak, kaak! C-can't... breathe...!"

Ian looked down on the whimpering, wounded boys with cold eyes.

"You brought this on yourselves."

Now that he'd hobbled their legs, the real lesson was about to begin.

It was time to engrave an unforgettable lesson upon Hector's gang.

So satisfying...

Charlotte slowly redeeming herself...

I'm shipping Sophia x Lottie...

This novel is a trap. It's not GB it's Yuri...

# Chapter 86 : Deserted Island Survival (5)

Deserted Island Survival (5)

— Chirp! Chirp!

A sparrow chirped indifferently in the forest.

"Ugh, uuuuuugh...!"

"Hic, ugh, huuuuh!"

"Keh! Kehk! Ugh!"

Hector's gang let out painful groans as they crawled across the muddy ground.

There were a total of 11 of them.

All of them had either broken legs or severely wrenched backs, making them unable to get up.

But Ian had no intention of forgiving them at this point.

'If you teach guys like this half-heartedly, they'll definitely come crawling back.'

Despicable people like that, who band together to prey on others' weaknesses, are almost always bullies who pick on the weak and grovel to the strong.

They become endlessly stronger to those weaker than themselves and endlessly weaker to those stronger.

And on top of that, they're idiots.

If you don't give them a clear education, they'll forget in no time and come again.

So with guys like these, you had to deal with them thoroughly—from the skin to the bone—when you caught them.

Etch the lesson deep into their soul, so it could never be forgotten.

So they'd never forget what price comes with crossing you.

You had to make sure that even fools like these would remember, so they'd never repeat what they did today.

'First, one of them.'

Ian pressed his knee into the back of the minion closest to him.

— Crunch!

"Ah, aaagh!"

The minion's face twisted in agony from being pinned down.

"Kuh, kuhh! S-stop...! Ah, aaagh!"

The minion sounded like he was dying, but Ian didn't care and grabbed him by the hair, jerking his head back.

— Crack!

"Gah, aaagh!"

The minion's face was covered in tears and snot.

"S-sorry! P-please! Please stop...! It, it's all my fault...!"

"What did you do wrong?"

"Ugh, ugh! E-everything! I'm sorry! I'll never mess with you again! Not your girl either! You! Please! Please, just this once...!"

"And?"

"Ugh? A-and...?"

— Crack!

Ian tightened his grip.

"A, aaagh! I'll never, aaagh! I'll never show myself again! Uuuugh!"

"Yeah. Not a bad answer."

Ian nodded.

"But you still have to pay for your sins this time."

"W-what!?"

Ian grabbed the minion's left wrist and yanked it.

— Crunch!

"H-hyaaaaaaaaagh!!!"

With a sickening crush, the minion's elbow bent the wrong way.

"We're not done yet."

Ian immediately grabbed the minion's ear.

"H-huuuuh!"

When Ian pulled, the ear tore away like a piece of paper.

— Rip!

"Kyaaaagh!! Kkek! Kkeh!"

The minion screamed as if his breath would stop, then buried his face in the mud.

He'd fainted from shock.

"....."

But Ian didn't stop.

— Smash! Smack! Crack!

Ian, still holding the minion by the hair, threw three punches into his jaw.

— Clatter...!

White teeth fell out of the minion's mouth like coins from a piggy bank.

Tooth fragments scattered on the ground, slicked with blood.

That was the end of one of them.

Now, ten remained.

"C-crazy...!"

"N-no! Please...!"

The gang, watching this brutal discipline in horror, started to whimper and crawl desperately.

"Ugh, uuuuh...!"

"Aaagh! My leg!"

But with broken legs and wrenched backs, even crawling ten steps away was impossible.

"A, aaagh!"

In the end, not a single one escaped receiving an unforgettable lesson from Ian.

"You too. Tell me what you did wrong."

"I, I never wanted to do it! Hector made me...!!"

"You're making excuses? That's an extra penalty."

"A-agh! Aaaaaaaaaagh!"

— Crunch!

— Rip!

"Kyaaaaaaagh!"

— Smack! Smash! Thud!

"Guh! Ghek! Geh!"

— Clatter!

"Uuuh... Ueek..."

Ask what they did wrong, break their elbow, tear their ear, knock out their teeth.

Make excuses—break their nose on top of everything else.

"A-ahh! Damn it...!"

One scrambled to fire a flare in a panic.

"Heh."

— Whoosh!

— Smack!

"Ow! Aaagh!"

Ian threw a rock, smashing both the flare and the guy's hand.

"Tell me what you did wrong."

"Y-you bastard! Even if I talk, you'll cripple me either way...!"

"So you're not going to talk? You'll regret it."

"R-regret what! I'll end up crippled anyway! Just get it over with! Y-you bastard!"

"Tsk."

— Twist!

"Hyah!? Hyaaaaaaagh!!"

When someone tried to fight back, he twisted and yanked out their jaw joint too.

About five minutes passed just like that.

"....."

"....."

"Grrrr..."

All 11 had finished their education.

The forest that had been filled with screams and moans was now calm.

— Flash!

— Flash!

Instead, the red lights on the belts at their waists flashed frantically.

"Ai, aigo... I knew it would end like this again..."

Sophia clutched her forehead, lamenting that things had ended this way once more.

— Shiver...

Charlotte, next to Sophia, was trembling anxiously.

'If I'd made the wrong move, couldn't I have ended up like that too...?'

If she hadn't decided to win Ian over in the middle... if she'd kept up her plotting to get in his way... Thinking she could have ended up like those minions made goosebumps prickle all over her body.

"Grrrr... Y-you bastard...!"

Then, a growling voice came from behind Ian.

"Kuh, kuhuh... I almost died for real! You crazy bastard!!!"

It was Hector.

He grabbed his throat as he got up again.

His neck had definitely been broken, but Hector was neither dead nor disabled.

This was thanks to the absurd regenerative ability of the Gold Hound Transformation.

Ian nodded calmly.

'When you use Gold Hound Transformation, your recovery amplifies even more than a troll's or most vampires'.'

He'd considered that when breaking Hector's neck.

He'd wanted to discipline the minions first while Hector was down.

— Gulp!

"U-urgh!"

But the recovery clearly wasn't perfect.

Hector fell back down and vomited.

So much strength had gone into healing that he was almost spent.

And the Gold Hound Transformation was almost undone.

"Heh, heh... Hehhh..."

Moreover, Hector's body was now suffering the full price of Gold Hound Transformation.

His eyes were bloodshot, and bruises were blooming all over his body.

His breathing was ragged, like someone with acute mountain sickness, and he looked ready to faint at any moment.

"Ripe for the picking."

It was the perfect state to carve an unforgettable lesson into Hector.

'This one, I'll need to pay even more attention to than the others.'

Hector was the ringleader of these despicable scoundrels.

That meant he had to be disciplined the most thoroughly, so this would never happen again.

— Rustle. Rustle.

Ian walked over to where Hector lay facedown.

Then, just as he'd done with the minions, he grabbed Hector's hair and yanked his head up.

— Crunch!

"Ugh, uuugh!!"

"If you beg for forgiveness, I might just let you go."

"F*** you...!"

Of course.

He hadn't expected him to beg for mercy so easily.

This guy's pride was enormous.

Actually, that was good; it was a reaction he'd hoped for.

"Ku, kuuh...!"

Hector's bloodshot eyes darted desperately around as he surveyed the area.

'What about the instructors...? Why aren't they showing up? Why haven't they come?'

He'd told the instructors not to get involved no matter what happened, but there should've been a limit.

His whole gang was out cold and sending red signals, so they should at least come check the situation.

"....."

"....."

In fact, the instructors who had been bribed by Hector were nearby, secretly watching.

But.

'It's better not to interfere now.'

'Better just to keep watching.'

They'd agreed not to rescue Hector.

Out of fear.

'If we get involved now... and Ian finds out we're associated with Hector, we might get retaliated against too.'

They also had their own guilt with Ian.

They'd given Hector's group favorable entry order to the island, and while Hector tortured Sophia and Ian, they'd created a blind spot in the control room's surveillance net so there'd be no interruptions.

'We could, of course, just pretend nothing happened and break it up, but Ian isn't someone easily fooled... If we show even a hint of suspicion, he'll pick up on it.'

'And right now Hector isn't even thinking straight—if we step in, he might conveniently blurt out that we took money or told us to catch Ian, and then we'll definitely get on Ian's bad side.'

'Right this second, even if Ian finds out we were bribed, surely he wouldn't do this to us...'

'But what if time passes...? If Ian remembers and comes for revenge later... my wife and children could be in danger... No, we'd definitely die!'

'So it's way too dangerous to step in now! We must not show our faces to Young master Ian! It's better to just hide and clean up after he leaves. Doing nothing right now is best...!'

Those were the instructors' thoughts.

"Haaa..."

Ian let out a low sigh and looked down at Hector with eyes that had gone cold.

"Alright. Since your pride is so strong, I'll give you a special choice."

"What...?"

"First option."

Ian picked up a sharp stone from the ground and set it down in front of Hector.

"If you gouge out your own eye with this, I'll spare you."

"...!"

Shock filled Hector's face.

"There's a second option too."

"...?"

Hector looked up at Ian in silence, his eyes trembling.

"You could simply do nothing."

Hector's brow twitched.

Just do nothing? Then obviously...

A hint of hope flickered in his eyes.

"But if you do nothing, I'll gouge both your eyes out myself."

"... Ah, ahh!"

Despair replaced every other emotion on Hector's face.

"Choose. If you do it yourself, I'll let you keep one eye. If you don't, I'll take both."

Ian waggled two fingers in front of Hector's eyes.

"By the way, if I do it, I'll make sure to extract the entire optic nerve."

Ian pressed his index finger hard into Hector's eye.

— Press!

"Aaaaaagh!!"

Hector squeezed his eyes shut, but his eyelids were much too flimsy a shield against Ian's fingers.

When sparks filled his entire vision, Ian finally withdrew his finger.

"Did you know? If the optic nerve is extracted, you can't get treated for it."

If the optic nerve survives, even if you lose your eyes, you can grow new ones and fill your sockets again.

But if the optic nerve is removed, you can't fix it with surgery.

"You'll live with artificial eyes for the rest of your life."

Of course, if you install magical prosthetic eyes, you can easily regain your lost sight.

But—

"But being stuck with prosthetics is a huge weak point as a swordsman. It makes you vulnerable to dispel magic."

Good prosthetics might resist dispel to some degree, but if someone uses a stronger dispel, even the best ones will fail.

In other words, once Hector loses his optic nerves, fighting mages for the rest of his life would be hard.

Every time he fought a mage, he'd lose his sight to dispel magic.

It would be a fatal weak point as a swordsman.

"Is that what you want? When you fight mages, you'll lose your sight every time."

"... A, ahh...!"

Pride and rage vanished from Hector's face, replaced by pure fear.

No matter how thoroughly rotten he was to the core, he was still just a fourteen-year-old.

If someone threatened to gouge out their eyes—including the optic nerves—anyone would tremble.

"... U-ungh...!"

Hector looked at the sharp stone on the ground.

He was being told to dig out his own eye with that.

'How can I do something like that...!'

It was an act that ran entirely against the survival instincts of any living creature.

Even more so for Hector, who valued his own body more than anything in the world.

"Damn it...! Damn it...!"

But if he didn't do such a crazy thing, Ian would gouge out both of his eyes for him.

"I'm starting the countdown."

"W-what!?"

"Ten. Nine. Eight..."

"U-ungh?! W-wait!"

His mind wasn't made up at all, but now there was a time limit!?

What would happen when the countdown finished!?

Would he immediately lose both eyes!?

That meant within ten seconds, he'd have to gouge his own with a rock!?

Damn!!! What kind of nonsense was this!?

"Seven. Six. Five..."

Even as Hector hesitated in anguish, the countdown fell mercilessly.

Hector's eyes trembled violently, taking in their last sight as living eyes.

That was the fate of eyes that had picked the wrong master.

I'm neither pro nor against torture...

But some people need them..

# Chapter 87 : Deserted Island Survival (6)

Deserted Island Survival (6)

"... Ah, ah...."

Hector looked down at the rock on the dirt ground.

A rock, pointed and sharp at the end, like a stone axe.

Ian had warned him that unless he gouged out one of his own eyes with it immediately, Ian would pluck both of Hector's eyes out himself.

Not just the eyeball, but even all the optic nerves hanging behind it, he'd extract everything.

"U, urgh...!"

Ah! No!

Anything but the optic nerves.

If he made an artificial eye with an artifact, his sight would return quickly enough, but just as Ian had said, artificed eyes break down easily under dispel magic.

Moreover, magical artificial eyes have set performance limits, so no matter how high your mastery, it becomes impossible to enhance your vision with aura.

In other words, the moment the optic nerves are removed, Hector's eyes would forever become his weakness.

Such a weakness would be a fatal hindrance to reaching a high position as a swordsman.

Succeeding as heir to the Goldhound family would obviously be completely out of reach, and he'd never even dream of fighting high-level mages.

"T, three, two...."

Even as Hector trembled in terror, the countdown continued without a shred of mercy.

"U, urgh!!!"

Hector picked up the sharp stone fragment.

If he had any strength left, he would have smashed Ian's head with it right now...!

But the aftereffects of the Gold Hound Transformation had paralyzed his limbs, and he was barely able to breathe.

"One...."

There was no more time for hesitation.

He wanted to beg for mercy, but just a minute or two ago, he'd trampled that precious opportunity himself.

Who would have expected that Ian would go this far?

He thought he alone was the villain in this world.

He believed that only those with a certain innate talent could hurt others and torment them without shedding a tear.

But Ian was far more vicious than he was.

Never did Hector imagine Ian would actually threaten to rip out both his eyes...!

'Ah. Aaah...!'

When driven into a desperate corner, a person instinctively starts to—regret.

Where did it all go wrong?

'From the beginning, I shouldn't have messed with this guy...!'

Should have just listened, should not have fought back!

The Heavenly Sword Lord clan wouldn't be interested in this guy for no reason, so why wasn't I more careful!

He should never, ever have provoked Ian, but instead he acted in the complete opposite manner....

What a stupid thing to do!

And now, because of that, he was in this mess...! This situation...!

"Countdown's over."

While Hector hesitated and regretted, the countdown ended.

"Lift your face."

Ian's hand reached toward Hector's eyes.

"A-ah! W-wait! Please, wait!"

Hector grabbed Ian's wrist with both hands, begging.

"...?"

"I-I made a mistake! P-please, just this once! I'm sorry! I really am sorry!"

Hector's last desperate choice was to beg for forgiveness.

"I'll never! N-never, ever go against you again! I'll never provoke you again! Please! Pleeeease!"

"Haa...."

Ian sighed, cold as ice.

"That's why I told you I'd forgive you if you gouged out one of your own eyes."

"A-ah...!"

Hector's face crumpled.

With things having gone this far, there was no pride left.

"Please! Anything but that! As long as it's not that, I'll do anything! Really! I'll do anything, so please!"

"... What could you even do if you can't gouge out your own eye?"

"I-I have instructors bribed by me! E-every exam, I'll make it so the conditions are in your favor! First place! I'll make it so you always come out on top! You want that, don't you? A-and! And!"

"And?"

"I'll g-give you all the support I can from my family! The G-Gold Hound Blood too! Not just my blood, but I'll collect all the blood from the side branches too and give it to you! You could make a fortune selling it as alchemy material! And, and I have access to family money! If you want that, I'll give it to you too!"

"... Hmm."

His desperate pleas felt unexpectedly sincere.

He was clearly pulling out every card he had just to escape this situation.

Ian paused for a moment to think.

However—

There wasn't much to consider.

"I don't need any of it."

"... Wh-what!?"

Currently, Ian's rank is that of Swordmaster.

Even without anyone else's help, securing the top spot in the Sword Dragon Hall was always possible.

Most Sword Dragon Hall cadets never even surpassed the expert level before graduating.

It was never difficult to be the top among such students.

What's more, by the end of the year Ian would likely reach late-stage Swordmaster, so earning top spot would only get easier.

He simply didn't need anyone else's help for that.

'And I don't need the Gold Hound Blood or money either.'

More accurately, there was no need to take it from Hector.

Ian possessed the Authority of Projection.

Whenever he needed something, he could just project it himself.

"Ah, aaah...! Then anything else! J-just tell me what you want! I'll give you anything! Somehow, I'll find a way to get it to you!"

Hector was desperate.

He clung to Ian's sleeve, half-crying.

"No... That's what you get. Why did you do it? Why did you bring this upon yourself?"

Most people would forgive at this point, but not Ian.

'Forgiving someone like this always ends badly.'

It might look desperately sincere for now, but that's never to be trusted.

This kind of guy, as soon as he escapes the situation, wipes his mouth clean and waits for another chance at revenge.

Like a gambling addict who grovels to friends for money, a criminal who pleads for leniency promising to reform before a judge, or an abusive husband grabbing his wife's leg and begging for one more chance....

They're always so desperate when they beg.

But if you're taken in and grant them mercy?

They act as if they were never so desperate, and stab you in the back.

'You'd help if you had the money!'

'It's all society's fault!'

'How can I not hit, since I'm like this?'

—and on top of it all, blame others.

In his past life, Ian had grown sick and tired of watching how petty mercy led to horrendous outcomes later.

He'd come to realize villains really don't change so easily.

Of course, when they beg, they're probably sincere in the moment.

But when the circumstances shift, the sincerity is easily discarded. For whatever reason.

That's why showing mercy to people whose very nature is rotten is foolish.

'You should trust only those worth trusting.'

Trusting him was as good as self-harm.

'Besides.'

Even without those reasons, Ian would not have forgiven Hector.

Hector had already crossed the line—and by a lot.

Sophia was Ian's reverse scale. Hector, with his gang, had tried to cruelly harm Sophia.

Ian had vowed never to let Sophia suffer the same fate as in his previous life, but this bastard tried to ruin that hope.

Hector had triggered the trauma Ian had harbored since his last life.

"To be honest, right now, I want to kill you."

But he could not.

It was because of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

If Ian killed Hector, a trial would be held, and the lord would surely try to defend Ian no matter what.

Since Ian had saved Yuria, the lord's deep affection for him had grown even deeper.

The problem was, if he defended Ian, Tywin, the Goldhound family head, could resent the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Tywin had risked even his own life for the lord's sake, and if the lord defended the murderer of his own son, that could only weaken his loyalty.

Ian did not want the lord to lose a loyal subject because of him.

That's why he could not kill Hector.

He could not burden the lord with that.

"I'm holding back. I'm letting you live."

Of course, even gouging out both of Hector's eyes would make the Goldhound family Ian's enemy.

But he could handle that much himself, even without the lord's intervention.

After all, this had happened during a practical exercise, so even if Hector sustained serious injury, the act itself was legal.

Gouging out both eyes might still be considered excessive cruelty and draw disciplinary action, but at worst, it would end with Sword Dragon Hall sanctions.

No matter what price he might have to pay, it didn't matter.

If it was to protect those he cherished, Ian would do anything.

- Kkwaaak! -

Ian seized Hector's hair in a tight grip.

"U, urgh!? Wa-wait! What are you doing!?"

"I'm the one sparing your life here. Isn't expecting anything more a bit shameless of you?"

A murderous glint flickered in Ian's eyes.

"You tried to hurt what's most precious to me. Even so, I'm letting you live."

"... Uh...!"

At Ian's words, Sophia's cheeks flushed just a little.

"...."

Charlotte glanced at Sophia with a look of slight envy.

Ian, unfazed, continued.

"So be grateful I'm letting you off with just your two eyes."

"W-w-wait! I'll do it! I'll do it myself! With the stone!"

"It's already too late."

The countdown had ended long ago.

"Lift your head, Hector."

"Aaargh! No! Not my eyes! Don't! Please!"

Hector squeezed his eyes shut and struggled to shake Ian's hand off.

But not even the barbarian Kugajo could break Ian's grip—an exhausted Hector certainly could not.

"Why make such a fuss? Didn't you try to gouge out Sophia's eyes too?"

"T-that was b-because, aaaah! Please! I was wrong! It was the Gold Hound Blood! I lost control! I won't ever do it again! Please! Pleaseeee!"

"Enough."

Ian picked up the sharp stone axe from the ground.

"I don't want to waste another minute on you."

"Wa-wait—!"

- Thud! -

Ian drove the stone axe through Hector's eyelid in one motion.

"KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH————————!!!"

Then, he twisted the stone axe and crushed Hector's eyeball.

- Crunch! -

For quite some time, Hector's wretched screams echoed throughout the forest.

Yet, despite how long Hector's screams lasted, no instructor intervened.

* * *

Control room aboard the ship supervising the Deserted Island Survival.

"Ho...."

Watching Ian through her personal screen, Aris let out a quiet gasp despite herself.

'Ian... Haa... This child is really... The more I see of him...'

On Aris's screen, the moment Ian pulled out both of Hector's eyes was reflected back word-for-word.

- Kyahhh! -

A barrier of spirit energy had been raised, so only Aris could hear the screaming.

Moments later, Hector, having lost both eyes, fainted and collapsed.

- Snap! -

Aris bit her own index finger.

It was to suppress the surge of excitement rising within her.

'Really... How far are you going to excite me...! Ian Greysel!'

It was astonishing that Ian had subdued Hector's gold hound transformation so easily, but what excited Aris more than that was the cruelty Ian displayed.

'Ah, aaah....'

Usually, he seemed just like a calm and quiet boy.

But when fighting foes, he showed endless cruelty.

This was the second time Ian had shown his ruthless side to Aris.

'When you killed Dellen without hesitation, I knew you were different.'

Aris's intuition had not failed her.

Ian was cruel.

He was born with a brutal nature.

But at the same time—

He was someone who truly knew how to control that brutality.

"Ah, aaah...!"

A cruelty he could control with perfect thoroughness.

That was a quality Aris rated very highly.

A talent only a rare few possessed.

To be born with such a savage beast in your chest is to walk a dangerous path.

To live among others, you must tame that beast.

But taming a beast isn't easy.

You're bound to get hurt, and if you make a mistake, you could be eaten by your own monster.

Those devoured by their inner beasts usually walk the road of mass murder.

They kill without discretion, become enemies of all, and die violently.

But of those born with cruelty, only an extremely small number succeed in taming the beast in their heart.

From then on, the beast is not a threat to themselves, but the strongest ally and strength.

'Aaah... Ian Greysel... You... You're really...!'

And Aris thought,

No matter how gifted someone is, if they lack this cruelty, then their power is hollow.

Why?

Because true strength can be wielded only to the extent of one's inherent brutality.

That was Aris's creed.

Strength is destruction. And destruction belongs only to the realm of cruelty.

Mercy. Compassion. Goodness. Nobility. Such things only suppress one's own strength and prevent it being fully displayed.

That's why those without cruelty cannot use even half the power they possess.

But Ian was different.

He had the nature to wield all of his innate strength.

He possessed true cruelty.

That was clear now.

'This child... really... truly remarkable.'

Most only acquire such cruelty after at least ten years on the battlefield.

But that boy already possessed it.

Moreover, while others cannot endure the cruelty gained by war and try to mask themselves in nobility or succumb to sadistic pleasure and become monsters,

Ian, at this tender age, was showing perfect control over the cruelty within.

He had not just enviable talent, but perfect control over his brutality as well.

He seemed like a genius crafted by the Sword God himself.

'Ian... What is your real identity? Are you just a once-in-a-generation genius? Or are you hiding something? ... How much does my father know about you?'

She didn't know. But a sense of impatience grew.

Aris loved her father, but she didn't want to give Ian up to him so easily.

- Crack!

- Drip!

Her bitten index finger's skin tore and blood began to flow.

But there was not a hint of pain in Aris's eyes.

What was reflected there was only ecstasy and yearning.

Ian. Honestly, it didn't matter what the boy was hiding.

Whether he was a dragon in disguise, a demon, or some other ancient mythical beast.

She just wanted to tame him completely as her own.

If only she could make him perfectly hers...

Everything else was trivial.

She'd feel an incomparable sense of security.

"Haa, hauu...."

The more she saw, the more she wanted him.

Ian seemed like a custom-made gift set up by the Sword Gods just for her.

'Ah, this won't do....'

Aris's breathing quickened, unnoticed.

If it weren't for the barrier, instructors nearby would have sensed something odd.

'No matter what it takes... I must make him mine...!'

Aris didn't blink as she stared at Ian.

Her excited breaths grew ever more heated.

Dangerous...

# Chapter 88 : Deserted Island Survival (7)

Deserted Island Survival (7)

Ian thoroughly collected the name tags of Hector and his gang as well.

He tore off a total of 12 name tags. Converted to test score, that's 2,400 points.

Including Kuga's name tag, it amounted to 2,600 points in total.

He had singlehandedly defeated 13 cadets in just one day, earning an enormous point total.

No matter how skilled Yuria was, there was no way she had taken down 13 people in one day, so Ian was probably in first place at this moment.

But there were still six days of the test left.

If he became complacent, Yuria might catch up in points.

To secure the top spot for certain, he needed to keep gathering other cadets' name tags and find as many hidden elixirs and magic orbs around as possible.

'And I need to check if Yuria is safe.'

On this deserted island, there was little that could threaten Yuria, but since Aris was supervising this test, there was always the possibility of unexpected dangers.

Above all, Aris's true intentions had not yet been figured out at all.

With a week ahead of them and everything unpredictable on this island, he couldn't feel at ease unless he kept Yuria close by and continuously watched over her.

'But before that.'

Both Sophia and Charlotte were badly injured.

Their arms and knees were covered in wounds, with some places still bleeding.

'I should get them treated before moving around.'

Protecting Sophia was just as important as keeping Yuria safe, and Charlotte was the daughter entrusted to him by the Heavenly Sword Lord, so he had to make sure nothing happened to her as well.

They would be moving together from now on, and he couldn't have them carry injuries as they went.

"For now, let's move to where there's water."

Ian led Sophia and Charlotte.

After about five minutes of walking, they found a good spot.

There was a comfortable rock to sit on and many medicinal herbs visible around a brook.

"Sophia."

Ian washed his blood-stained hands and called to Sophia.

"Yes?"

"Rest here with the lady for a moment."

"Huh? Young master, what about you? Where are you going?"

"To get herbs... and a few other things we need."

"If it's just that, let me go with you? I'm not that badly hurt."

"It won't even take three minutes. Just sit tight. Lady Charlotte, please rest for a bit too."

"... Y-yes."

Ian briefly disappeared into the forest.

—drdrdrdrdr...

Charlotte clasped her hands and trembled.

"Miss?"

Sophia asked with concern.

"Are you all right? Are you cold?"

"H-huh? Oh, n-no, I'm fine... it's just..."

"Wait a moment. I'll get a fire going quickly."

"L-let's do it together, Sophia."

"Hey! Just rest! You're hurt! Don't touch the dirt now!"

"... O-okay. Thank you."

"Hehe, there's no need for thanks."

As Sophia arranged stones for a campfire, she looked up at Charlotte.

"... How's your arm wound?"

A scratch from Hector's claws.

Charlotte's forearm was still damp with blood.

"It must hurt a lot... right?"

"No. This much doesn't even sting."

Though she said so, her hands continued to tremble.

"... I'm sorry, miss. All because of me..."

"Huh?"

Charlotte blinked her eyes wide.

"Why are you apologizing? It's Hector's fault, not yours."

"Still... I fell into the trap like an idiot..."

"And Hector dug that trap, didn't he? Enough, stop."

"Miss..."

"If you're sorry, don't make that sad face. I hate it. And don't go wandering alone where it's dangerous again."

"Y-yes..."

"Good!"

"But are you sure your wound is okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"... But you're still shaking. Aren't you overdoing it?"

"I told you, I'm all right..."

Charlotte clasped her trembling hands together.

"... It's not because I'm hurt that I'm shaking."

"... What?"

"Sophia... Are you okay? Are you really fine?"

"What do you mean?"

"... How can you really be so unphased?"

Charlotte glanced around for a moment and swallowed.

"Haa... People were getting broken and torn apart. It's the first time I've seen someone's eyes getting gouged out like that..."

The gruesome, chilling scene replayed in her mind.

Ian breaking the minions' arms, ripping ears, shattering jaws.

Then crushing and pulling out both of Hector's eyes. That long, horrific scream.

Blood dripping from Ian's hands.

"In the middle... I was afraid Ian might really kill Hector... My head was telling me to stop him, that I had to step in, but I just couldn't..."

She had feared that such horror would spill over onto her.

Charlotte had known Ian was strong beyond reason, but she hadn't imagined that he could also be so ruthless.

"Oh... So that's what you meant..."

Sophia smacked her lips.

"Um... Maybe you'll get used to it soon?"

"... What?"

Charlotte frowned.

"You think I'll get used to it?"

Sophia's tone was somehow...

"You... You're talking like this has happened often before?"

"... Uh, what? Umm..."

"...? Why are you answering like that?"

"... Y-yes? Wh-what?"

"If it happened, it happened. If not, it didn't. Why are you dodging the answer..."

Charlotte's hairs stood on end.

"I-it did happen! That's why you're so calm, right!? You're used to it now, aren't you!?"

Sophia panicked.

"N-n-no! Wh-what do you mean!? I don't know anything! I know nothing! Really!"

"Don't lie! You're just pretending because you can't deny it anymore!"

Charlotte glanced around once more.

Ian still hadn't returned.

"Has Ian killed someone before...?"

"H-Huh!? I-I said I know nothing! This conversation is over! Over!"

"W-why can't you even deny that!?"

That means he has killed before!

"S-Sophia!!"

Charlotte grabbed Sophia's shoulders and shook her.

"W-woaah!? U-uh! Why are you doing this!!"

"Tell me! You can tell me everything!!"

No normal person starts killing people in their mid-teens.

Anyone who did was either a devil or a monster in human form.

How had a kind child like Sophia ended up beside such a monster!

'I have to save her! Right here and now!'

Now that Charlotte had seen Ian's ruthlessness, she had no choice but to completely revise her original plan.

Win him over? Recruit him?

What good is it to recruit a talented genius if she herself can't handle him.

How many times in history had people been eaten alive trying to tame a monster.

Keeping a monster by your side was a disaster waiting to happen—you could be devoured at any moment.

If she ever provoked him, she and Sophia could end up just like Hector...! Ahh!

'Of course! Ian! His eyes never looked normal!'

No wonder she'd always found him scary when they made eye contact!

Her instincts had been warning her all along:

Mess with him, and you won't even leave bones behind.

All the times she had never rebelled out of fear during her time as a servant in the mansion—it had all been because of that terror.

Back then, swallowing her pride had hurt, but now she realized that fear had saved her.

If she'd lost her temper even once... what would Ian have done to her then?!

She shuddered just imagining it.

"L-let's run away!! Sophia, with me!!"

Charlotte's desire to win Ian over vanished.

Instead, the vacant space left by that ambition was filled with terror—the need to escape.

"W-what!? What are you saying all of a sudden!?"

"I'll take responsibility! I'll feed and support you somehow! I—I even have an adventurer's license! I can make money doing wall construction!"

"S-seriously, what are you talking about!?"

—rustle!

Then, she heard the sound of grass being stepped on right behind her.

"Ah!"

"If you talk that loudly, it's dangerous."

Ian returned.

"You never know what could be around."

"Ahh!"

Charlotte's face turned stark white.

"...?"

Ian's brow furrowed.

"Your complexion doesn't look good. Are you alright?"

"N-nothing happened!"

"...?"

Ian could tell Charlotte's state wasn't good.

"I'll disinfect and bandage you immediately."

He set down what he had brought.

A salve made by crushing medicinal herbs.

A natural disinfectant—tree sap with sterilizing properties, diluted with clean water.

A large, sticky leaf cut into a natural bandage.

"First, let me check your arm, miss. Please sit here."

Ian pointed to the nearest rock.

"Y-yes..."

Charlotte moved stiffly, like a wind-up doll.

Once she was seated, Ian carefully rolled up her sleeve.

"Ow, ow...!"

The fabric, stuck to the dried blood, pulled open the wound, exposing the raw, red flesh.

It was quite a severe wound.

'... She blocked Hector's claws barehanded.'

The claws of a Yellow Hellhound are heavier than most axe blades.

Blocking such vicious claws barehanded, without using aura, could have easily resulted in far greater damage.

Had it not been for Hisperion's robust physique, both arms would have been ripped off.

'... Honestly, I'm surprised, Charlotte.'

He had heard she'd leapt in to save Sophia.

She had thrown herself to this extent to save someone else.

For Sophia's sake?

Charlotte, of all people, overexerting herself for someone else.

This was the first time Ian recognized this side of her.

"Thank you for helping Sophia."

Ian expressed his sincere gratitude.

Of course, it wasn't as if this single act had opened his heart to Charlotte, who had been a traitor in his past life, but he did see her in a slightly different light.

"If Lady Charlotte hadn't bought us time first, I would have been a step too late."

"... Ah."

This was the first time in two months of living at Lunabreeze that Charlotte had ever heard a thank you.

"... Ah, ah!"

Charlotte stammered, lips trembling, searching for a reply but unable to find the right words.

Ian hadn't been expecting an answer, so he just continued what he was doing.

He gently took her arm.

"I'll disinfect it first. It will hurt a little."

—stream!

Ian carefully washed Charlotte's wound with the disinfectant he'd brought in bamboo.

"Hyah!? Hiccu...!"

As the disinfectant stung her wound, Charlotte gulped back a sharp hiccup.

"Miss! Hold my hand!"

—grab!

As soon as Sophia reached out, Charlotte quickly grabbed her hand.

—stream!

Clenching her eyes shut and stomping her feet, Charlotte gritted through the pain.

"Well done."

Disinfection was complete.

Now it was time to apply the salve and bandage the wound.

With skilled hands, Ian treated Charlotte's wound with care.

"..."

Except for when he poured on the disinfectant, none of Ian's first aid treatment was painful.

His hand was delicate and gentle, his expression so calm that she strangely felt reassured just watching him.

He looked completely different from the person who had ruthlessly dealt with Hector's gang moments before.

'... How can one person's demeanor flip like the back of a hand...?'

It was as if there were two personalities in one body.

Just a moment ago, she'd seen him as a monster she ought to run from, but as he took such delicate care of her wound now, for some reason...

She felt... A little reassured.

"... Hm?"

Sensing Charlotte's gaze, Ian lifted his brows.

"Why do you look at me like that?"

"Ah! N-no!"

Charlotte flushed and turned away.

Her heartbeat grew a little faster.

Ian looked at Sophia.

"Sophia. I'll have to disinfect your knee too, so roll up your trousers and wait."

"Okay!"

"Are you hurt anywhere else?"

"The inside of my elbow and my shoulder. I think I twisted them a bit."

"... Haaa. All right."

Finishing Charlotte's treatment, Ian tended to Sophia's wounds next.

"..."

Charlotte studied the leaves carefully wrapped around her arm.

'He's so thorough...'

The leaves were wound so tightly and securely over the wound, and yet she didn't feel uncomfortable moving.

'He's really skilled.'

Moreover, the disinfectant and salve Ian had made were all 100% natural ingredients.

'And I have no idea what he made these from.'

Charlotte had learned the basics of herbal medicine and first aid at the Sword Dragon Hall, but the natural medicine Ian made followed combinations she'd never seen taught there.

—peek! peek!

"Um..."

Charlotte feigned distraction and kept stealing glances at Ian's profile.

He was absorbed in treating Sophia's knee.

Every gesture of his hands spoke of confidence and skill.

'... Ian. What is this guy, really?'

It had been astonishing enough when he effortlessly overwhelmed Hector's gang, but on top of that, even his skill and knowledge in treating wounds was extraordinary.

'He's on a completely different level... He doesn't feel like someone my age at all.'

It felt less like being around a fellow cadet and more like sitting with a seasoned veteran who'd seen it all.

'Truly an enigma.'

Just moments ago, she'd seen him only as a monster she desperately needed to escape from, but seeing this side of him made her see things differently.

He didn't seem frightening at all now, but it wasn't quite the same as her old desire to make Ian her own person, either.

It was a subtle feeling, a bit different from all the emotions she had felt toward Ian so far.

The strange sense of reassurance she felt from his profile.

She could almost understand why Sophia chose to stay at Ian's side.

'Maybe there's really no need to run away after all...'

In fact, if she could become one of Ian's people, wouldn't his side be the safest place of all?

Unconsciously, Charlotte began to have such thoughts.

# Chapter 89 : Deserted Island Attack (1)

Deserted Island Attack (1)

The control room aboard the vessel supervising the deserted island survival event.

—Ssshhk.

Aris crossed her legs as she watched Ian through her personal screen.

"How caring he is."

The screen showed Ian tending to Sophia's skinned knee.

'He's being extremely careful with her wound.'

Ian's expression as he treated Sophia was nothing but serious.

He was completely focused, as if determined not to leave even the faintest scar.

Every step, from disinfecting to applying ointment and wrapping the bandage, was meticulous and quick.

At the same time, it was so gentle and delicate that it was clear he was being considerate of Sophia.

Except when disinfecting, Sophia hadn't let out so much as a whimper of pain.

She just nibbled on the raspberries Ian had picked and hummed a little tune.

It looked as if the pain had vanished quickly, and she was in a good mood.

'She must be incredibly precious to him?'

Even at a glance, Ian cherished Sophia deeply.

'Just what is their relationship?'

She had already found out through some background investigation that Sophia had been a maid working for the Greysel family.

But the relationship between Sophia and Ian didn't look like that of a maid and young master.

It was certain there was something more between the two than what appeared on the surface.

'Not a romantic relationship... I don't think.'

At first, aris had wondered if they were dating, but the reports from informants assigned to Ian said the two had not been seen doing something as simple as kissing—nothing that lovers would typically do.

'Friends... but somehow, that doesn't seem quite right either.'

They were too close to be just friends.

The only thing they lacked was the physical affection typical of lovers; outwardly, they looked just like a couple.

When they rested in the annex, it was common for them to give each other lap pillows, and sometimes Sophia would get into Ian's bed, and they would sleep together.

If a boy and a girl were close enough to share a bed, could they be just friends? That was nonsense.

'Then... are they actually in a relationship but have made some vow of chastity to restrain themselves until adulthood?'

If that was the case, that was some phenomenal willpower and self-control.

At such an age, when they should be full of curiosity about the opposite sex, living together, even sharing a bed, and yet not even kissing?

Even Aris, who as a Grandmaster had a will stronger than steel, clicked her tongue at that patience.

'Well... seems there's no way to know for sure right now.'

How did Sophia win Ian's heart?

It was a question that intrigued her, but there simply wasn't enough information at the moment.

But the truth that Ian cherished Sophia immensely was clear enough.

'Sophia. I'll remember this. And... if necessary, use it.'

If it became necessary to move Ian by force, Sophia would be a good card to play.

'But... I mustn't go too far with that trick.'

If Sophia were harmed improperly, Ian would certainly seek revenge, regardless of who the opponent was.

Hadn't he, without hesitation, gouged out both eyes of Hector, the legitimate heir of the Goldhound family, number one in the Heavenly Seal ranking?

Ian would never forgive anyone who harmed those precious to him.

Even Aris herself, a direct descendant of Hisperion, would be no exception, should she cross the line.

'I don't want to make Ian an enemy.'

Of course, even if, by some chance, she ended up hostile to Ian, she could just kidnap and brainwash him to solve things easily, but Aris didn't want to taint Ian that way.

Brainwashing required a process that destroyed the mind, inevitably degrading cognitive skills, reasoning ability, and concentration.

Ian was too valuable to simply ruin so carelessly.

Aris wanted to have Ian, filled with infinite potential, in that pure state.

'Anyway... he keeps showing me new sides. Ian Greysel.'

Aris raised the corners of her lips in satisfaction and licked her lips.

Until now, she had only seen Ian tear and break people; she'd thought his talents lay solely in fighting, but to think he could also so expertly tend to someone else's wounds.

'He's quicker and more skilled than most healers.'

There wasn't the slightest clumsiness in the process of disinfecting, ointment application, and bandaging.

'Really, a fascinating person.'

Aris recalled the previous memory.

When Ian fought Dellen.

The way he instantly healed a gash in his own torso with a bizarre regenerative power.

'Even though he has such regenerative power... did he still learn herbalism and first aid?'

It should've been unnecessary knowledge for Ian.

With such an immense regenerative ability, any ordinary wound could be healed in no time.

'And it doesn't even seem shallow knowledge.'

Ian found disinfectant, ointment, and bandages all in under three minutes on-site, using herbs not even taught at the Sword Dragon Hall.

'Also, I didn't know those broad leaves could be used as a bandage until now.'

Aris was a swordswoman herself, with her share of missions and battle experience.

She'd been injured and had to perform makeshift first aid in the field multiple times, but she'd never seen anyone treat wounds as quickly and neatly as Ian.

'On the surface, he's the very image of a fourteen-year-old boy.'

But when examining his capabilities one by one, he far surpassed most veterans.

Even in swordsmanship, Ian had already demonstrated overwhelming skill over Swordmaster Dellen.

Not only Yuria, who was praised as the greatest talent of the current era, but even Ragnar, called the greatest swordsman of all time, hadn't stood equal to a Swordmaster at fourteen.

'But Ian overwhelmed her.'

Moreover, what Ian showed wasn't just swordsmanship.

When exacting revenge on Hector's gang, Ian didn't act like a fourteen-year-old at all.

'No ordinary fourteen-year-old could calmly gouge out a person's eyes.'

No matter how innately cruel, the same would be true.

If he'd had a sadistic inclination, Ian would've shown barely contained excitement in the pleasure of cruelty.

Children with such tendencies usually did.

But Ian didn't get excited at all.

'At that age, an ordinary fourteen-year-old couldn't easily kill even a single goblin.'

Ian tore and broke those men without the slightest hesitation.

'Regardless of appearances... if you only look at his actions...'

A fourteen-year-old boy? Nonsense.

Judging from Ian's actions, he was already a fully developed elite swordsman, completed through thorough training and experience.

'But Ian isn't a mere swordsman.'

When Ian fought Dellen.

He showed a bizarre regenerative power, instantly healing a wound that had split his torso.

Not only that, but he had quickly fired off shield magic without chant, and even seized Dellen's Flostilla, displaying a shocking ability to use Sword Spirit Release far more skillfully.

'With this much evidence... Anyone but a fool would realize.'

Ian wasn't an ordinary fourteen-year-old boy.

And.

Maybe...

Not even an ordinary human.

'The more I see him...'

And the more she thought about it,

The more credible the theory became that Ian's boyish appearance was just a shell.

His swordsmanship, level, character, magic, abilities, knowledge, and skills.

How could all that be explained away as mere talent?

'Then...'

If he's not human, what is he?

'There are many possibilities.'

There are plenty of beings in this world with human form, but not human nature.

Dragons that changed shape with Polymorph, mixing among humans and enjoying their company for amusement.

Vampires who deceived and preyed upon people by assuming beautiful forms.

Ancient wraiths and demons constantly looking for opportunities to possess ever-stronger human bodies.

And there could be more special cases besides those.

'And among them, the highest probability is...'

Probably a dragon.

'If Ian were a vampire, he'd have a strong scent of blood. If he were a wraith, there would be a deathly aura; if a demon, a sense of wickedness.'

But Ian had no scent of blood, nor had she sensed any evil aura.

Which meant the most likely was a dragon.

A dragon's transformation was akin to authority; no matter how keen your sense for magic power, it was nearly impossible to detect the transformation.

Even for a Grandmaster like Aris, spotting a dragon's Polymorph was challenging.

So, if that being who so perfectly took on a boy's form was something other than human, the odds of him being a dragon were highest.

And if Ian was a dragon Polymorphed into human form, everything made sense.

The level of aura that overwhelmed Yuria, who was hailed as the greatest talent of the era.

Swordsmanship that overwhelmed the Swordmaster Dellen at the age of fourteen.

Shield magic fired without chant.

Instant healing of a lethal chest wound.

Knowledge of herbalism and skilled first aid.

A calm temperament and bold cruelty.

Every skill, every bit of knowledge, every ounce of seasoned experience Ian showed.

If Ian's core was that of a dragon aged over a hundred years, all of it was easily explained.

'Honestly, if not this, I can't think of any other possibility.'

And if Ian really was a dragon.

'Most likely, he's a hatchling.'

A hatchling.

A young dragon, not even five hundred years old.

'Because he struggled against Dellen in their fight.'

If he were a mature dragon over a thousand years old, he could have subdued Dellen much more easily.

And had he been such, he would have immediately noticed Aris's presence, watching him from afar.

But back then, Ian hadn't noticed her at all, even at the end.

And when they met in front of Kartai City's warp gate, he'd looked utterly flustered.

So, if Ian was a dragon, the odds were very high he was just a young hatchling.

'If so, that's truly desirable.'

Aris's heart surged with excitement.

If Ian really was a hatchling, there would be immense satisfaction and reward in taming him.

Perhaps it would be an opportunity to mix dragon blood into this prestigious Heavenly Sword lineage.

If tamed properly, she could make a pact with the dragon and turn him into a guardian dragon who would protect the Heavenly Sword family until the end of his ten-millennia lifespan.

'However... if Ian is truly a dragon...'

Why did he come to our family?

That was what she needed to learn first, to make taming him easier.

Did he come to satisfy his curiosity for knowledge? Or just for fun?

Or maybe he came to fulfill some mission.

Did her father know Ian's true identity?

Why did he choose to disguise himself as the eldest son of the Greysel family?

"Hmm..."

Aris bit her lip and sank into deep thought.

'There's still nothing I can definitively conclude.'

She lacked information.

And it wasn't even certain that Ian was a dragon.

'The evidence is somewhat insufficient.'

If Ian were really a dragon, wouldn't the Demon Cult have made a move by now?

Demon Cult.

Official title: the Cult of Great Sin.

A nationwide bandit organization and pseudo-religion that engaged in terror and pillage.

Their true purpose was unclear, but what was certain was their blind collection of magic power.

Elixirs, spirits, heroes.

Anything with immense magic power became a target of the Demon Cult.

And dragons were literally the embodiment and origin of magic power.

So, the Demon Cult's dragon hunts had been infamous for centuries.

They possessed technology to find reclusive dragons and power to hunt even strong ones.

For them, dragons were the highest-priority targets and the tastiest delicacy.

'If Ian were a dragon, the Demon Cult would've surfaced at least once.'

They'd never let a solo hatchling wander about alone.

Even if Ian hid his appearance and identity perfectly, the Cult could sniff out hiding dragons and hunt them down.

And recently, with the Heavenly Sword Lord absent from the Heavenly Sword Palace, there had been more than enough chances to attack Ian.

Yet, the Demon Cult had never appeared, not even once.

Therefore, she couldn't be certain Ian was a dragon just yet.

'I'll keep more possibilities open and keep watching.'

Just as Aris pondered the next challenge to assign to Ian—

"S-Sword Dragon Hall Master!!"

An instructor pointed at the magic screen and yelled.

"I-In the testing arena! There's a demonic energy reaction! H-Hah! A red barrier is spreading!!"

"... What?"

Aris stared at the screen the instructor pointed to, eyes wide.

The screen displayed the entire island.

From the blue sky above, a magical shield formed of demonic energy was quickly descending and enveloping the deserted island.

"Th-The Demon Cult...!?"

The sudden intrusion of the Demon Cult.

At that moment, the last crucial puzzle piece snapped into place in Aris's hypothesis about Ian's true nature.

# Chapter 90 : Deserted Island Attack (2)

Deserted Island Attack (2)

The forest on the deserted island, where the survival exam was taking place.

Eight demons disguised as instructors had gathered in one place.

One of them was driving a long artifact into the dirt ground, while the rest watched all around as lookouts.

"We're ready."

When the demon who finished installing the artifact reported to the leader, the leader nodded decisively.

"Then, activate it right away."

"Yes."

The demon answered quietly and infused demonic energy into the artifact.

—Shuuuuuuuk!

At that moment, light burst forth from the artifact's crimson jewel.

—Paaaah!!

Soon, a red beam shot up toward the sky.

—Chaaaaaa!!

As if red paint had been splashed onto the blue sky.

The red light spread far and wide, unfolding a giant barrier.

The once-clear sky was instantly dyed crimson.

"Good. We've succeeded."

The head demon looked up at the reddened sky and smiled in satisfaction.

"I never thought it would work so perfectly."

From infiltrating as instructors by breaking through Hisperion's strict security—to sneaking into the exam site and flawlessly deploying the barrier.

Now, the instructors and knights outside couldn't enter this place.

This deserted island was now the demons' domain.

The operation wasn't completely over, but honestly, having made it this far, the rest was virtually guaranteed success.

The head demon let out a pleased laugh.

"We skillfully slipped through their cracks."

No matter how powerful the organization, when the inside is in chaos, many gaps open up.

And given that Hisperion had faced several incidents recently, there was greater potential for lapses.

The Heavenly Sword Lord had left for an expedition, vacating the main residence, and his eldest son Theo was exiled beyond the northern border, leading to a purge of his faction in the Heavenly Sword Palace.

As a result, several large empty spaces formed within the palace, and the demons seized that opportunity to slip in with agility.

They disguised their identities, wore human masks, bribed corrupt individuals, and quietly eliminated troublesome obstacles.

"Thinking about it again, everything fell perfectly into place. That's how flawless the plan was."

At that moment—

—KWAANG!!!

A mighty surge of enhanced energy clashed with the barrier, erupting with a roar.

—KURURURURUR!!

The impact was so powerful that the entire island shook.

"Guh, kuk!?"

"Ugh!"

"W-what's that?!"

The demons recoiled at the violent shock.

"Grr...!"

The head demon's face hardened as well.

"A-Aris Hisperion...!"

She was outside, trying to break the barrier.

—KWAAAANG!!!

Another shockwave boomed shortly after.

"Guh, grr!"

"Damn! My ears are going to fall off!"

One demon said, his face pale.

"I-I don't think the barrier can hold!"

The head demon gritted his teeth.

"Don't worry."

They had already anticipated that Aris herself would show up.

"Even if she's a Grandmaster, this barrier isn't something that can be broken easily."

This barrier was an artifact directly supplied by the cult.

A demon artifact operated by demonic energy—and among those, only the very finest.

—KWAAANG!!

—KWAAAAANG!!

Yet again, the shock struck twice in quick succession.

The power striking the barrier was growing stronger.

"I-it looks like it could break at any moment!"

"Grr, grrr...!"

Under that brutal siege, even the head demon swallowed dryly.

"What, did she hide a lover on this island?! Why is she hitting with her full might like that?!"

They had expected Aris to make a move, but the strength she unleashed was far beyond their calculations.

If the barrier hadn't been there, the impact would have torn half the island apart.

To unleash that kind of enhanced energy across the shifting sea, even a Grandmaster would have to harness an incredible amount of aura, risking damage to her own body.

'No. More than that—'

With strikes at that level, if the barrier broke, the very cadets inside could get caught up in the aftershocks.

But Aris fired her enhanced energy without any regard for herself or for the aftermath that might ensue.

—KWAAAAANG!!!

"U-urgh!"

"Grrh! Leader!"

"Damn...!"

They'd assumed Aris wouldn't fire her energy properly, fearing the cadets would get caught in the blast.

It seemed they'd misjudged Aris.

"Everyone, attention! We need to hurry!"

The original plan was to have 30 minutes.

They expected even a Grandmaster, alone, would need about that much time to break through this artifact's barrier.

But—

—KWAAAAAAAANG!!!

"U-urgh!"

"Kraak!"

The enhanced energy's power kept growing more ferocious.

At this rate, not even fifteen minutes would last, let alone thirty.

"Everyone, focus!"

The head demon raised his voice.

"From now on, it all depends on how fast we move!"

Their objective was to kidnap the talents of the Sword Dragon Hall.

The most important targets of all were the young direct bloodline members of Hisperion.

"Only aim for the top targets! Then regroup here as quickly as possible!"

They would present the abducted targets to the cult.

The cult would buy anything of value in this world.

And those direct bloodline members possessing Hisperion's powerful blood—such value was unimaginable, truly beyond measure.

Divine blood, akin to a panacea, flowed through their veins, and every part of their bodies brimmed with the blessings of their lineage.

'If we succeed in this operation...!'

The head demon could receive an unimaginably great reward from the cult.

He would gain even stronger demonic energy, more precious artifacts, and a higher position.

'Above all, the most important target is Yuria!'

Yuria.

The darling of the Heavenly Sword, born with all the blessings of Hisperion and hailed as heaven's prodigy.

Even among Hisperion's array of geniuses, she was rumored to be a once-in-a-millennium gem.

Truly, she was a divine relic in human guise.

'Honestly, even if we lose the other targets, as long as we succeed in kidnapping Yuria...!'

Even at the very least, the head demon would be awarded Grandmaster-grade demonic energy from the cult.

With such incredible power in hand, he could spread his influence over a much broader stage.

With that power, he could plunder more treasures and abduct more prodigies for the cult...

Someday, the cult might even grant him an official rank, and he could ascend to an executive spot—enjoying a level of power that now seemed like a dream.

That was the future, and the ambition, the head demon dreamed of.

—KWAAAAAAANG!!

"From now on, split into four teams! Two per team!"

The demons quickly paired up, forming four teams in a flash.

The head demon spoke.

"I'll be Team A. Yuria is mine. And you all..."

Team B: Charlotte Hisperion!

Team C: Kargon Hisperion!

And the last, team D...

"Target Ian Greysel."

The original target had actually been Hector Goldhound.

The Goldhound family's second son, direct bloodline, who possessed the blood of the divine beast Gold Hound.

But upon preparing for this operation, they discovered Hector was gathering a bunch of instructors around him.

They hadn't figured out why, but something was clearly up, as he posted instructors like guards all around.

Therefore, they'd avoided Hector's vicinity entirely since first entering the island.

Right now, instructors were heavily concentrated around him.

'It's better this way.'

With the instructors all gathered in one spot, it made it much easier for themselves to move around.

'Ian's a pretty juicy target himself.'

The head demon had heard the rumors.

Ian, once only known as 'mana-impaired', had apparently bested Yuria in the entrance exam.

He had even manifested the proof of an Expert—an authority—during the match.

Only one person in history, as of one year ago, had reached the Expert realm at age 14.

That was Ragnar Hisperion, the Heavenly Sword Lord among the five sword families, called the greatest swordsman of old and new.

That record had been broken this year by Yuria, and not long after, Ian broke it again.

People buzzed—two heaven-sent talents, worthy of comparison to Ragnar, had appeared in the same generation!

'With talent like that, the cult will pay handsomely.'

Yet, Ian was still a slightly less desirable target than Hector.

Ian undoubtedly possessed enormous talent and potential, but that talent had yet to fully bloom.

So he was a secondary option.

Like the seed of wild ginseng.

If cultivated properly, he would gain immense value, but as a mere seed, he was nothing yet.

In the head demon's eyes, Ian was less than a year-old wild ginseng.

Amazing future value, but little present worth.

'To fetch a worthy price, I'd have to raise him myself—what a nuisance.'

Ian might have the greatest talent in history, but the cult wouldn't pay much for mere potential alone.

A pig that grows fast is only valuable after it's grown up—a child with talent alone wouldn't be bought at a high price.

'At least up to the verge of Master, I'd have to raise him before the cult would buy at a reasonable price.'

Ian could obviously grow much further, but if he did, the head demon would have trouble controlling him.

The head demon's level was early-stage Master.

If he tried to raise Ian and sell him, but grew him too much instead, he might just end up getting devoured himself.

'It's like raising a wild beast. Very dangerous, and hard to get much out of it.'

So the cult didn't buy kids with only talent at a high price.

Unbloomed talent was worthless, and trying to raise them was hard to control.

'It really is a hassle.'

Ian's talent in swordsmanship itself was supposedly just as great, so even at the start of the Master's path, he might be hard to handle.

'Guess I'll have to cut his tendons and meridians as soon as I catch him.'

Make sure he can never wield a sword for life.

Just force him to cultivate aura like a mindless beast and present him to the cult.

If the tendons and meridians are cut well, he can be pushed even higher safely.

"Then what about Hector?"

—KWAAAAANG!!!

"Forget him. Leave him!"

Hector was much simpler to present to the cult and get a reward for, but trying to capture him would be more risk than worth.

The average demon here was late-stage Expert.

The head demon himself was early-stage Master.

They could easily handle a few instructors, but if many gathered, that would be troublesome.

Hector's Gold Hound was tempting, but it wasn't worth having to break through a wall of instructors to get it.

—KWAAAAANG!!!

And there was no time.

The barrier could crack under Aris's enhanced energy at any moment.

—KWAAAAANG!!!

"Damn it! Isn't that bitch getting tired?!"

After firing such energy at full power, she should be exhausted, yet her tempo wasn't slowing—it was getting faster.

"L-leader! We really should hurry!"

"Yes..."

The head demon clenched his jaw, seeing the barrier already much thinner than a moment ago.

It'd barely been a minute since the barrier was raised, and it was already battered.

They really had almost no time.

"We have... less than fifteen minutes. Everyone, attention!"

"Yes!"

"Yes!"

"Secure your targets and regroup here in thirteen minutes! Got it?!"

"Yes!"

"Yes!"

"We don't have time, so avoid combat if possible! Ignore instructors and cadets unless they try to stop you! Only fight if absolutely necessary! For everything else, use your own judgment!"

—KWAAAAANG!!!

"Move out!"

"Yes!"

"Let's go!"

—PABABABAT!!

—SASASASAK!!

The commanded demons darted off in different directions.

'Now then...!'

The head demon pulled a tracker from his pocket.

It was an artifact that could track the mana stones they'd embedded in the targets' belts ahead of time.

'Yuria... She's pretty far.'

He called out to his partner.

"This way!"

"Yes, boss!"

His subordinate, whom he thought of as a younger brother, followed closely behind.

—PAAAT!

Leaping swiftly between trees, the head demon spoke.

"Think you won't fall behind?"

"Boss, honestly, after we got this far, haven't we already pretty much succeeded?"

—KWAAAAAAANG!!!

"Just gotta watch out for that!"

"Yeah. That's the real problem."

He was early-stage Master level.

His "brother" was late-stage Expert.

The instructors on this island were all about late-stage Expert at most.

Even if instructors appeared en masse, the eight of them could easily tear them to shreds.

—KWAAAAAAAANG!!!

"R-right! The only real threat is outside! We just watch out for her and hustle! Hurry, hurry!"

"You're right!"

Unless there's a hidden Master-rank instructor—which seemed unlikely—the operation couldn't fail.

'No one here should be stronger than me.'

Master-rank instructors among the Sword Dragon Hall's staff were a literal handful, and they'd confirmed none were here before starting the plan.

All the instructors present were officially weaker than the head demon.

So, just as his "brother" said, as long as they hurried, failure wasn't possible.

They just needed to kidnap the weaklings—those who hadn't even reached early-stage Expert—and bring them here.

—KWAAAAAAANG!!!

'That's right. The real concern is Aris outside!'

As long as they returned before that barrier broke, it would be a smashing success.

Everyone could return with their targets.

None of the instructors present should be stronger.

* * *

"....."

Ian looked up at the reddened sky.

"The Demon Cult...?"

Those bastards actually dared come here?

—KWADEUK!!

Ian instantly ripped off the belt sealing his aura.

The moment the survival exam on the deserted island ended.

Massacre the demons!