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

Chapter 91 : Deserted Island Attack (3)

Deserted Island Attack (3)

—Sssssssssssssssss!

A crimson barrier descended, covering the blue sky.

"... What?"

Ian widened his eyes as he looked up at the sky turning red.

"...!"

It was a sudden phenomenon, but the moment he saw it, he recognized what it was.

"The Demon Cult...!"

It was the same filthy barrier he'd grown sick of seeing in his past life.

The Demon Cult or demonic beings always unfurled it whenever they raided a specific area.

'Those bastards showed up? Here?'

Ian instantly grasped the situation.

'It's an attack!'

The Demon Cult was attacking the deserted island.

'How dare they...!'

What was their goal?

It was obvious.

They must have come targeting Yuria.

In his previous life, those bastards had attacked the Sword Dragon Hall several times, trying to kidnap her.

—KWAANG!

Just then, an enormous impact echoed from outside the barrier.

"Ugh!"

"Kyaa!"

Sophia and Charlotte shrieked, covering their ears in terror.

"...!"

Ian looked up in the direction the sound had come from.

'Aris...!'

She was trying to break the barrier from the outside.

—KWAANG!

Another violent rumble followed.

"Kyaa! Young master!"

"Wh-What's going on all of a sudden?!"

The girls clutched their ears, faces crumpling as they threatened to cry.

"Grrr..."

Ian grimaced, gripping his ringing ears.

'She's smashing away with reckless abandon.'

If Aris kept firing her enhanced energy at that force, even her body wouldn't hold out long.

'The way she's throwing herself into breaking the barrier with all her might...'

Did that mean Aris wasn't behind this raid?

'No. That can wait.'

Now was the time to find Yuria first.

—Crack!

Ian swiftly tore off the belt suppressing his aura.

"H-Huh?! Young master!?"

Sophia gaped, speechless.

"You're not supposed to take that off!"

That belt was a monitoring device Sword Dragon Hall issued to cadets to monitor their condition.

If a cadet undid or broke it without permission, it was a huge infraction—minus 5,000 points.

"The exam's already over, Sophia."

"Huh?"

—KWAANG!!

"U-Ugh! Ow! My ears!"

"Keep watch around us for a bit. If anyone comes, shake me and wake me up right away."

"W-What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find Young Lady Yuria."

Ian sat cross-legged on the ground.

'Frenzied Insight Style: Heavenly Thousand Direction Incense Burner.'

A technique to spread his aura wide, searching for Yuria's Heavenly energy.

—KWAANG!!

"Young Lady Yuria? Sitting like that? Young master! Wait! If you just sit here like this, your eardrums will burst! At least put in earplugs first...! Ah, geez! He already closed his eyes! I can't stand this! Miss Lottie! Help me find anything we can use as earplugs!"

Sophia's frantic voice faded away.

His five senses grew distant, and his sixth sense sharpened.

'Yuria... Where are you.'

Ian spread his aura net-wide, combing the entire uninhabited island meticulously.

It would take about five minutes to pinpoint her exact location.

But then.

'Hm?'

A strange, unpleasant energy brushed against his aura.

'What?'

Thick demonic energy.

It was rapidly closing in on his position.

"What the—!"

Ian's eyes snapped open.

"Sophia! Charlotte!"

"...?"

"Yes?"

"Get down!"

Ian immediately dove forward, pushing Sophia and Charlotte to the ground.

"Uwaagh!"

"Kyaa!"

At the same time—

—Whiisssht!

Daggers zipped past, grazing their heads.

—Thwack! Thump! Crack!

The daggers stuck into the tree behind them.

—Ssssss...!

Smoke rose from the tree bark where the daggers struck.

They were coated with potent poison.

"W-What the—!"

"What is this?!"

Sophia and Charlotte recoiled in horror at the sudden flying daggers.

"You're kidding me—? He dodged that?!"

—Rustle, rustle.

A woman emerged from the brush.

With an icy, rigid expression, she glared at Ian.

"It was a perfect shot. Who are you? How did you dodge that?"

—Rustle, rustle, rustle.

Three more emerged behind the woman.

"Maybe you just missed?"

"Shut up! I threw it right!"

"Both of you, quiet. We just need to take the target. If you missed, throw again."

"I told you I didn't miss! You—you! How did you dodge?!"

On the surface, they looked like ordinary people, but Ian could feel it.

'They're demonic humans.'

They gave off an unbearable, greasy sensation.

Clear demonic energy.

They didn't seem to care about hiding it at all, instead, they were releasing it in full force.

'At this level... at least late-stage Expert.'

—Rustle.

One stepped forward, rolling their shoulders.

"Either way, we lucked out—targets all gathered together nice and cozy. This'll be over fast."

Ian stood protectively in front of Sophia and Charlotte.

'Targets?'

They were calling us the targets?

'I thought they came for Yuria...'

Were there multiple targets?

Could they be aiming not only for Yuria, but also for all direct members of the Hisperion family and top vassal houses?

'Makes sense.'

If the demonic humans went to this much trouble, they'd want the maximum reward for risking their lives.

'So, the "targets" they mean are probably...'

Himself and Charlotte.

They'd come to offer Ian's talent and Charlotte's bloodline as sacrifices to the Demon Cult.

Sophia probably wasn't a likely target yet, as she wasn't worth their trouble.

'And the fact that four demonic humans came for us...'

That meant two were attached per target.

'I need to hurry.'

Even for Yuria, fighting two late-stage Expert demonic humans alone would be hard.

Even if there were instructors near her, they wouldn't be able to protect Yuria.

Sword Dragon Hall's instructors were only high-rank Experts.

And Yuria, among the targets, was the most important.

She might've drawn even stronger demonic humans than these.

If one at Master level moved to abduct her, nothing the surrounding instructors did would protect her.

—KWAANG!!

"No time to chat! The barrier can't last much longer! Suppress the targets now!"

"Roger. Let's finish and get out."

"You two keep watch. We'll take care of the targets."

—Shrring! Shrring!

Two drew their blades and advanced.

"You brats, just behave. If you resist, I'll chop your limbs off one by one."

"Heheheh, I love those frightened faces most of all..."

"Y-Young master!"

Sophia tensed, freezing up.

"Ugh...!"

Charlotte's pupils trembled as she swallowed dryly.

'What the hell is going on?! Where did these freaks come from!?'

Charlotte glared at the approaching demonic humans, teeth chattering.

Each one's aura far surpassed her own.

Easily at the level of active knights.

They weren't opponents cadet-level could handle.

'N-No way—even Ian can't...!'

Ian had shown overwhelming strength against Hector's gang, but that was only cadets fighting cadets.

These were real, first-rate, combat-tested pros—no way even Ian could beat them.

'I-It's useless even if I join in...!'

It would have been the same even if Yuria was with them.

But still...

That didn't mean she could give up without resisting at all.

'I have to protect Sophia!'

So, at the very least, help Ian as much as possible...

'Flail till the very end, at least!'

As Charlotte resolved to move up beside Ian—

—Slide.

'Huh?'

Ian gently but firmly pushed Charlotte back behind his own back, as if telling her to stay put.

'W-What are you doing...?!'

What was his plan?

Did he mean to take them all on by himself?!

No matter how you looked at it, cadets couldn't possibly handle these guys—not even with the numbers.

Charlotte stared at Ian, that thought in her eyes.

—Nod.

Ian looked back at her, giving a small nod.

His eyes were calm—entirely unafraid.

'C-Confident?'

Charlotte didn't know what Ian was thinking.

But it seemed he had something up his sleeve.

'... He, he wants me to trust him?'

She hesitated a moment, then gave a silent nod.

She still felt anxious, not knowing his motives, but she decided to trust him.

Ian had always shown her feats well beyond her expectations.

Maybe, just maybe, he'd surprise her again.

Rather than making things worse by acting rashly, she figured it was best to trust the always-amazing Ian.

Ian took a deep breath.

'Thank goodness Charlotte's reading the mood. If she charged ahead, she'd be harder to protect.'

Ian eyed the approaching demonic humans again.

'Full of openings. They won't be hard.'

The demonic humans seemed preoccupied with Aris outside the barrier.

They plainly didn't see Ian and the girls here as any threat.

'Do they think they can just pick us up like teddy bears?'

It wasn't a strange assumption.

The world knew Ian's cultivation was just entry-stage Expert.

Charlotte was at the top of the Trainee Rank.

These enemies were late-stage Expert class, and outnumbered them as well.

On paper, the demonic humans were overwhelmingly favored—so being wary would've been stranger.

"Heheheh."

One of them smirked, relaxing completely.

'Seeing kids cry... it gets me every time.'

—KWAANG!!

"Hurry up!"

Aris was still pounding the barrier outside, and his allies behind him were urging him to move—

But...

'I want to torment them more. Make it fun.'

Bullying little ones was this demonic human's only joy in life.

'There's still a little time for some fun, right?'

Even with Aris smashing at the barrier, it'd hold for at least ten minutes.

'Maybe I'll chop off an arm?'

Or...

'That brown-haired girl over there.'

The demonic human looked at Sophia.

'She's not a target—I could just kill her, couldn't I?'

Maybe slice open her belly and spill her guts.

What kind of faces would the two brats make then?

What kind of face would the brown-haired girl make seeing her own intestines?

'Ahh... I can't stand it!'

—Whoosh!

He raised his blade high.

About to chop down and sever Ian's shoulder, then slice Sophia's abdomen—

"This one is truly beneath even an amateur."

"Huh?"

Ian mockingly muttered, looking at the demonic human.

And at the same time—

—Slash!

"Huh...?"

Suddenly, the weight of the demonic human's raised right arm vanished.

He'd swung his sword—but his arm was nowhere to be seen.

What he saw instead was—

"What?"

Blood.

Crimson blood spurted from his own shoulder.

"U-Uwaagh! Aaagh!"

Suddenly his right arm was gone.

The moment he realized it, searing pain ripped through the stump.

"AAAAAAAGHHH!!!"

He crumpled, clutching his stump, shrieking.

All those ugly, cruel intentions he had were severed along with his arm.

Now, the loss was filled only with despair.

"H-Huh!"

"What's going on!?"

The demonic humans on lookout spun around in shock.

"J-Jimmy! Jimmy got taken down by a kid!"

"What?!"

A black longsword was now in Ian's hand.

"What the hell is that sword?!"

—《Authority of Projection》—

◆Item

[Elegance Armory Longsword Lv.53]

———————

The ultra-expensive longsword he'd manifested with Authority of Projection—Sophia's own.

"He was unarmed a second ago!"

"You're saying he chopped off Jimmy's arm with that...?! That baby-faced punk?!"

"Damn it! I told you he was weird! I didn't miss before—it wasn't a fluke!"

"That doesn't matter! Go! All at once!"

The demonic humans all raised their blades and charged.

—Whiisssht!

One slashed fast, while the other two followed like wings.

The swordpoint formation of three late-stage Expert demonic humans—a solid combo.

But—

"Pathetic fools."

If your opponent turned out far stronger than expected, you should retreat, not combine attacks.

To charge in without understanding your enemy was suicide.

Not that Ian minded their pathetic choice.

—《Authority of Projection》—

◆Skill

[Subspace Storage Magic Lv.91]

———————

Ian summoned Vladiark, which he had stored in subspace.

—Pop!

"What the?!"

A massive sword hilt popped out from empty air.

—Clack!

Ian seized it with both hands.

"Hup!"

He poured enhanced energy into it.

"W-What the—!"

"Is that—enhanced energy?!"

And swung powerfully.

—KWAANG!!

The enormous blade of Vladiark ripped through the air, the earth howling as if overturned.

Clouds of dirt and debris shot high.

"Ugh!"

"!?"

"Ghk?!"

The demonic humans, caught in the destructive force, didn't even have time to scream.

Vladiark's enhanced energy gnawed their bones and flesh, turning their bodies to dust and scattering them into the air.

—Whhoooosh!

A gale blew from the force of the blow.

Dust was swept by the wind,

—SHAAAAAA!

The blood and flesh of the demonic humans, mixed in the dust, were sucked greedily into Vladiark.

—Wriggle! Wriggle!

Vladiark's tendrils squirmed in satisfaction, having devoured three late-stage Expert demonic humans in an instant.

"H-Haa... Haa...!"

The demonic human who'd lost his arm gasped in shock—

"??????"

"Uh...? What...?"

—with Sophia and Charlotte behind Ian frozen, mouths agape.

"You there."

Ian pointed Vladiark at the armless demonic human.

—CHUK!

"Eek!?"

His face, already pale, blanched even further.

"I'll ask you."

"S-S-Speak—I-I'll talk! Spare me!"

"Name all the cadets you came to target."

If he could identify all their targets, he could thwart their plans easily.

Ian had no intention of letting a single cadet—including Yuria—fall into demonic hands.

Nor would he let a single demonic human escape alive, either.

'I'll feed them all to Vladiark.'

A rare chance to harvest demonic energy.

If he gathered enough, he'd even be able to operate demon artifacts that ran solely on such energy.

Vladiark's tendrils writhed, as if it craved the blood of more demonic beings.

Chapter 92 : Deserted Island Attack (4)

Deserted Island Attack (4)

The demon who had lost his right arm screamed silently.

'Wh-what on earth...! What the hell just happened!!'

He had thought he could toy with that boy as if he were playing with a flimsy toy, but instead, he had lost his right arm, and three of his companions had turned to dust and disappeared in an instant.

'The situation!! How did things change like this all of a sudden...!!'

From the demon's perspective, his resentment was understandable.

How could he have predicted an irregular like Ian?

A fourteen-year-old student, summoning a sword with magic and wielding a master's enhanced energy.

It was something so far beyond common sense, a variable the demons could not have imagined in their wildest dreams.

'W-What on earth is this...!'

Charlotte, too, was just as stunned and confused.

'What on earth is all this...! Wh-what did he just do!?'

She had thought Ian might have a plan, but she never imagined he would show something this shocking.

Charlotte had no idea how to understand or accept what she had just witnessed.

A technique to summon a sword with bare hands.

The power to turn three demons to dust in a single blow and overturn the earth in front of him.

If Charlotte wasn't mistaken, what Ian demonstrated was clearly...

Magic and enhanced energy.

'B-but...!'

How is that possible!?

For a direct descendant of the Greysel sword family to use magic.

And Ian had summoned a sword at such an incredible speed, without even an incantation.

She had never seen such fast, instantaneous casting, even from the mages of the Heavenly Tower.

And what else?

Enhanced energy?

Enhanced energy is the symbol of masters, proof of a top-tier swordsman.

Did Ian really wield that level of enhanced energy?

Then that meant Ian was at the master level.

'That's impossible!!'

Even Yuria, said to possess the greatest talent in history, was only at the entry-stage of Expert at fourteen.

Even Ragnar, renowned as the greatest swordsman of all time, only reached the master stage at age eighteen.

But now what?

Enhanced energy of a master at fourteen!?

This was so far beyond common sense.

It was something that didn't appear even in the most exaggerated and glorified legends.

'This...! This can't just be explained as having good talent!'

No matter how transcendent one's talent might be, there was no way someone could achieve such mastery in both magic and aura by the age of fourteen.

That was physically impossible.

'What on earth are you, Ian Greysel!?'

Why, with such overwhelming power, had he hidden himself behind the shell of a "half-wit who can't even use aura" until now?

And why was he now suddenly revealing himself, displaying his strength without reservation before her eyes?

'Ugh, urgh...!'

Charlotte's head throbbed with heat.

Ian was absolutely not an ordinary fourteen-year-old boy.

A person who could unleash such extraordinary powers so casually—how could he possibly be an ordinary boy?

'I completely misjudged Ian!'

Charlotte's estimation of Ian was once again revised.

Until now, she had thought of him as merely a genius on par with Yuria.

She had thought her father, Heavenly Sword Lord, had brought Ian into the Heavenly Sword Palace solely because of his incredible talent.

But now she saw that was a completely mistaken assumption.

'Ian isn't just a simple existence like that!'

Both the former image of Ian as a "half-wit who can't even use aura," and the reputation this year of a "genius to rival Yuria" were just masks.

There was definitely a real core hidden beneath.

'D-dad, what have you...! What did you bring into the Heavenly Sword Palace!?'

N-no way...!

Was Ian a secret weapon that dad had been hiding and raising!?

Is that what this was!?

Then why did he place such an important existence by my side!?

G-gasp!

Could it be, thinking of me as the successor...!?

'Haaah!!!'

While Charlotte allowed her imagination to run wild like that—

"Then, I'll wrap things up now."

Ian had just finished questioning the demon.

"Your targets were me, Charlotte, Yuria, and Kargon. Four in total."

"Y-yes! Th-that's correct, sir!"

"And you have four remaining teammates. Among them, the leader is at the early-stage of master."

"That's right, sir! Yes, sir!"

Ian raised an artifact that looked like a compass.

It was the target location tracker the demon had possessed.

"You can locate the targets with this. Yuria is the golden arrow. Kargon is the red arrow."

"Y-yes! Yes, that's all correct!"

"I see."

—Then, fwoosh!

Ian stabbed the demon's torso with Vladiark, expressionless.

"Keugh!?"

The demon looked up at Ian with a gaze full of disbelief.

"W-why...!?"

He had given up everything, answered every question as asked!

Wasn't the atmosphere such that he would be spared if he talked!?

"....."

Ian didn't bother to answer.

He simply stared down, cold as ice.

A creature who, until just moments ago, had tried to wield a blade at him and Sophia—there was no way he would spare him just because the demon was acting a little pathetic now.

And—

Ian had no intention of sending off someone who leered at Sophia without any pain.

—Kwaaaah!

Ian used aura to stimulate the tendrils of Vladiark.

—Squirm! Squirm!

"K-kyahhhhh!!?"

Vladiark's tendrils burrowed into the demon's body like roots.

—Shluuuurp!

At the same time, Vladiark began to greedily suck in flesh and blood at a tremendous rate.

"K-kkk!? Kkhk!?"

The demon squirmed in agony as if every vein in his body was being sucked out like noodles, unable to even scream properly.

—Grrrrk! Grrrrk!

It took about ten seconds for Vladiark to devour every last scrap of flesh with greedy, writhing tendrils.

Ten seconds in which the demon must have felt excruciating pain, but as punishment, it was a rather short time.

If you called it mercy, it was mercy.

Mercy for having obediently revealed all information.

"H-huff...!"

Charlotte, watching Vladiark's ravenous feasting, involuntarily covered her mouth.

Her eyes were full of mixed fear and astonishment.

'W-what is that!'

A greatsword that devoured people whole!

What Ian had demonstrated with just magic and enhanced energy was enough to make her faint, and even his weapon was terrifying in its own right.

'If this is just what Ian showed in about five minutes...'

How powerful must the true body hidden beneath that tiny tip of the iceberg be!

Goosebumps rushed over Charlotte's entire body for a moment.

—Shwick!

Ian returned the sated Vladiark to its subspace.

"Eep!"

He could hear Charlotte gasping behind him, but he ignored it.

Ian now looked at the tracker the demon had left behind.

An artifact shaped like a compass.

Four arrows, each of a different color, pointed in different directions.

Each arrow indicated the tracker implanted in each target's belt.

Yuria was the golden arrow. Kargon was the red arrow—that's what he had heard.

—KWAANG!!

Just then, Aris's enhanced energy clashed with the barrier again, making another thunderous boom.

"Khh..."

Powerful enough to cleave a mountain in two.

But despite her repeated attacks, the barrier still held firm.

'Even for Aris, it will take at least another ten minutes to break through this barrier.'

Barriers used by the Demon Cult are durable enough that even masters struggle to break them.

Moreover, judging from the intense crimson color, this one was of exceptionally high quality.

Since Aris was at the lower end of the Grandmaster rank, it would likely take her at least ten minutes to break it alone.

'Ten minutes.'

A short time to the demons, but a long time to Ian.

'The demons will hurry up and make their move. They'll try to abduct Yuria and Kargon within ten minutes.'

That meant Ian had to move quickly as well.

Within ten minutes... No, within eight minutes, he needed to secure Yuria and Kargon if he wanted to protect them from the demons for certain.

'Yuria comes first.'

Yuria's location—the tracker's golden arrow—was pointing east.

"Sophia. Lady Charlotte."

Ian turned and called out to the girls.

"We need to move quickly now, so I'll carry you both."

It would be faster to go alone to Yuria, but protecting Sophia and Charlotte was just as important as securing Yuria's safety.

He couldn't just leave them alone on an uninhabited island where the enemy ran wild.

Sorry, but there was no time to ask for consent.

Ian immediately hoisted both girls onto his shoulders.

"W-what!? Young Master Ian!?"

"Kyaa! Young Master! That tickles!"

"Hold on tight!"

Ian drew as much aura into his toes as he could.

—Paaang!!!

—Shweeeeeee!!

In a single leap, the scenery changed entirely.

"Kyaaah!!"

"Young Master Ian!!!"

Literally as fast as the wind.

Ian dashed forward, tearing through the air without stopping.

* * *

Deep in the forest of the uninhabited island.

"Yuria Hisperion... Found her."

The leader of the demons and his trusted lieutenant had located Yuria.

"She's alone. Lucky us."

"Huh?"

Yuria looked up at the demons in the trees.

"So it was because of me again?"

When the sky had suddenly turned crimson and Aris's enhanced energy was being fired from outside the barrier, she'd had a bad feeling that something was wrong.

She had never imagined someone would be targeting her for another ambush.

Similar things had happened so many times in her life, even from a young age, that it was no longer even surprising. Now, it just felt tedious.

Who sent them this time? Her sister? Her brother? A side-branch? Nobles? Foreigners? Criminal organizations? The Demon Cult?

Given the foul stench she'd sensed for a while, the odds favored the Demon Cult.

"'Again?'"

The demon leader stared down at Yuria.

"It's as if you're saying this has happened often."

"Pretty much? Not all that uncommon."

Yuria smacked her lips bitterly.

She was reminded of Dellen, who she had lost just a few months earlier.

"So? What are you here to do? Are we just going to stare at each other?"

"No."

—KWAANG!!

The sound of Aris's enhanced energy crashing into the barrier echoed again.

Time was short for the demons.

—Shing!

The demon leader drew his sword from his waist.

"I've come to take you."

"Hmph."

Yuria clenched both fists.

"It won't be easy, you know?"

One of the reasons Yuria trained so diligently every day was precisely because she didn't want to be easily taken down by the likes of these people.

"It would've been nice if you'd just come quietly. But it seems we can't take you without injury."

The demon leader infused his sword with demonic energy.

—Wooosh! Whoosh!

A blood-red flame ignited along the leader's blade.

Then soon—

—PAAAAAAANG!!

The blood-red flames condensed, compressing until they shot up as a pillar, like surging lava.

"E-enhanced energy!?"

Yuria grimaced.

'M-master level is still a bit much for me...!'

To make matters worse, Yuria was unarmed.

Maybe if she'd had the Divine Sword Genesis right now, she could have tried something, but Genesis currently slumbered in the vaults of the Heavenly Sword Palace.

'S-should I... try that!?'

Among the many abilities of Divine Sword Genesis—

Summoning.

—PAAAAANG!!!

"....."

Yuria glanced at the demon leader.

He stared at her coldly, enhanced energy flickering. Killing intent emanated sharply from him.

If she showed even the slightest opening, he looked ready to pounce immediately.

Truthfully, the gap in power was so wide that the moment he attacked, Yuria wouldn't be able to resist, but her reputation had spread enough that the leader was being cautious.

He didn't want to be careless.

Which made the situation all the more dangerous.

'Summoning will take some time...'

But with a demon like that facing her, fighting bare-handed would only ensure a crushing defeat.

It was better to try summoning while he was hesitating like this now.

—FLASH!

Yuria thrust both hands forward forcefully.

"Hmm?"

The demons watching Yuria tensed their eyes.

—Zzzt!

White sparks jumped from Yuria's hands.

"What?"

"B-boss! That girl is doing something! Give the order!"

"Wait!"

A white magic circle began to form in front of Yuria's palms.

"That's—"

The subordinate demon shouted.

"Divine Sword! That girl's trying to summon the Divine Sword, boss!"

It was information they'd learned while investigating Yuria.

Those chosen by the Divine Sword could summon it whenever and wherever they wished.

It was one of the many functions of Divine Sword Genesis.

"N-now's the time to attack while she's defenseless!"

"Wait!"

"Huh?"

The subordinate, who was about to strike Yuria, was held back by the demon leader.

"What are you doing, boss! We need to grab her before she picks up the Divine Sword!"

"Wait. Let her summon it."

"Huh?"

"This is our chance to capture not just Yuria, but the Divine Sword as well. Take both."

Divine Sword Genesis was a threatening weapon, but if the wielder was only at the early-stage of Expert rank, the demon leader didn't see it as much of a danger.

To use a human analogy, it was like a five-year-old wielding a sharp kitchen knife.

He told his subordinate to stand back, and as long as he wasn't stabbed, he'd be fine.

He had a sword too, so if he managed the distance, he could subdue Yuria and claim the Divine Sword as loot.

But then—

—CRASH!!!

The magic circle radiating white light shattered before it could be completed.

"Haaa... damn it."

Yuria exhaled deeply and clenched her molars tight.

The summoning had failed.

She still lacked sufficient resonance with Divine Sword Genesis.

"Um..."

Yuria spoke, a little sheepishly.

"I'll try just one more time. Could you give me a moment?"

—KWAANG!

Aris's enhanced energy shook the barrier.

There was no time for the demons.

"Pathetic. So much for your natural talent. You're no different from any other clumsy child."

"Ugh!"

"L-let's just take her, boss! We're running out of time!"

"Yes. We'd better."

He would have liked to secure both Yuria and the Divine Sword here, but if he waited for the summoning, he couldn't predict when the barrier would break.

—KWAANG!!

Aris shook the barrier again.

"There's really no reason to insist the Divine Sword be summoned right here..."

He could take her back to their lair and force her to summon it there.

"Alright! I'll cut off a leg first!"

"Do it."

—Shing!

The subordinate demon drew his sword.

He shot forward like an arrow, aiming to slice Yuria's thigh, when—

—CHIMINGGGGGGG!!

A sound like tens of thousands of bells ringing at once came from behind the demons.

"What!?"

"Huh?"

The demons instinctively turned toward the sound.

"H-huh!?"

"W-what is that!!"

What entered their field of view—

Was a magnificent, silver field of blooming flowers unfurled in the sky.

—SHWEEEEEEE!!

Tens of thousands of petal-blades began to cascade toward the demons like a torrential downpour.

Scatter - Senbonzakura!

I mean, Spirit Sword Release - Flostilla!

Chapter 93 : Deserted Island Attack (5)

Deserted Island Attack (5)

— SHRAAAAANG!!

Tens of thousands of petal blades poured down like a torrential rain toward the two demons.

"What, what is that...?"

"Shit! It's coming this way!"

The demon leader readjusted his grip on his sword, which was wreathed in blood-red enhanced energy.

"B-boss, you've got to dodge!"

"No! You can't dodge it!"

That was not the kind of attack you could avoid.

No matter how fast you move your body, you can't dodge a rainstorm under a roofless sky.

"If you dodge, it'll be too late! Get behind me, fast!"

The demon leader stood in front to protect his subordinate.

— KWAAAAAANG!!

Then, he raised the might of his blood-red enhanced energy to its peak.

"Let's see what you've got!"

He swung his sword at the oncoming shower of blades.

— KAGAGAGAGAGANG!!!

Tens of thousands of blade fragments clashed with the red enhanced energy.

Sparks exploded viciously in all directions.

"Krrrhh...!!"

— KAGAGAGAGANG!!

'This is absurdly heavy...!'

It felt as though he was standing against a raging waterfall with only a single blade.

— KAGAGAGAGANG!!

A single slip in controlling his enhanced energy would shatter his sword, and if he relaxed his grip, he could lose his weapon entirely.

'D-dammit...!!'

The demon leader squeezed his sword with enough force to burst his palm.

'Where the hell...! Where did something like this come from all of a sudden!?'

Even for himself, a Master, this was an attack hardly manageable.

'This must be...!'

It looked like magic, but it wasn't.

If it had been magic, he could have sensed the casting beforehand.

'It's Sword Spirit Release!'

A secret art of official Hisperion swordsmen who have received a special sword from the Sword Lake.

'But...!'

The might of Sword Spirit Release is usually proportional to the wielder's talent.

'So what the hell is this power...!?'

The crushing weight of the tiny blade waves was truly overwhelming.

It felt as though his grip could tear apart at any moment.

Given this level of power, the sword was surely bestowed upon someone with Master-rank talent.

'Did someone with Master-rank talent appear here!?'

It couldn't be a cadet.

Sure, there were a handful of cadets with the talent to reach the Master rank, but—

This exam didn't allow them to bring their named swords from the Sword Selection Ceremony.

Moreover, to handle Sword Spirit Release so masterfully, one would need to bond with the sword for a long time.

Considering the young age of the cadets, even handling Sword Spirit Release this well would be difficult.

So,

'The one attacking us must be an instructor!'

But then,

'Was there an instructor with Master-rank talent!?'

No.

That couldn't be.

'I spent so long preparing for this operation!'

If there really were someone of that talent, the demon leader would not have let it pass.

He would've been marked as a priority threat and contingency plans would have been made.

'Then...! Who the hell is it...!?'

Just who unleashed such a monstrous attack!

It couldn't be a cadet—and not an instructor—!

Who did I overlook in this deserted island!?

— BULGE!

The demon leader strained his eyes.

— KAGAGAGAGANG!!

'Who are you!?'

The one who unleashed Sword Spirit Release must be right behind this storm of blades.

A massive flow of energy was emanating from behind.

The demon leader glared with wide eyes, searching through the gaps between flaming blade fragments.

— KAGAGAGAGANG!!

"...!"

He was in a much more obvious spot than expected.

'Right close by!'

Just fifty paces behind the tsunami of blades.

As if to prove he was the caster, he held his sword high over his head.

'But...!'

The demon leader's brow furrowed.

'Is... is that a boy?'

The sparks distorted his vision, but even a glimpse showed it was definitely not an adult's silhouette.

Still short and frail—a child, not fully grown.

'A cadet!'

A mere child was behind this brutal attack!?

Barely a teenager...!

Using Sword Spirit Release at this level!?

'N-no way!'

Right then.

'What!?'

As lightning flashed, he spotted a massive black greatsword suddenly gripped in the boy's hand.

'What else is that!?'

Just a moment ago, he'd only held one sword.

Where had that ridiculously huge weapon appeared from!?

— BUUUUNG!

The boy swung the monolithic greatsword and hurled it at the demon leader.

— WHOOSH! WHOOSH! WHOOSH! WHOOSH!

The massive blade spun in a circle like a boomerang toward the demon leader.

'What?'

Seeing such a crude, absurd throwing attack made the demon leader smirk.

'Idiot! Giving me such a fine shield!'

The demon leader readied his left hand.

'I'll catch that greatsword!'

If he caught it at the right moment—

He could use the greatsword as a shield to break through this blade storm.

'And then!'

He'd rush at the boy and slice off both his arms in a single blow—so he couldn't use Sword Spirit Release anymore.

— WHOOSH! WHOOSH! WHOOSH! WHOOSH!

The black greatsword flew close right in front of him.

"Thanks, brat!"

The demon leader swiftly grabbed Vladiark with his left hand.

— SNATCH!

The greatsword's handle fit perfectly into the demon leader's hand.

It was perfect timing, a perfect catch.

'Then immediately...!'

He planned to infuse enhanced energy into the blade and force through the silver blades—

— SHUAAAAAA!!

"Ggh, ggh!?"

Pain racked the demon leader's entire body, as if his mana circuits were being shredded.

"Gg... GAAAAAAAH!"

Simultaneously—

Vladiark began ravenously devouring the demon leader's enhanced energy.

Tentacles sprouted from Vladiark's blade, wriggling grotesquely as they sucked up every bit of his Master's power.

"B-boss!?"

His subordinate recoiled in horror at the sight.

— SHRAAAAANG!!

"KRAAAAH!!"

The panicked subordinate was instantly shredded into bloody pulp by Flostilla's blade tsunami.

The moment the leader's stance failed, his protective shield vanished.

— PAAAAAAAANG!!

In an instant, both demons were dead.

— CRACK! CRACK!

Vladiark's tentacles writhed like a living beast, devouring the scattered flesh of the demons.

The once-billowing silver petals of Flostilla dispersed and vanished like fireflies.

"Wh-what is...!"

Yuria, who had been watching the entire scene in a daze, took an involuntary step back.

'T-that just now...'

Dellen's secret art.

It was definitely Flostilla's Sword Spirit Release.

'Why is Flostilla here!?'

Yuria didn't know what had happened to Flostilla.

She'd been confined beneath the Heavenly Sword Palace when Darkan and Aris had spoken of giving Flostilla to Ian as a reward.

'Don't tell me Theo sent another assassin? Even stealing nanny's sword!?'

Naturally, she misunderstood.

'What a ruthless beast! Villain!'

The tension welled up inside her.

'And what is that...!'

Yuria stared at Vladiark.

Wriggling and greedily sucking up the demons' corpses with its tentacles.

'A-a monster...!'

Yuria didn't recognize Ian's greatsword.

She'd seen it many times before, but Vladiark's appearance changed dramatically with the amount of aura it devoured—and seeing it writhing so excitedly with tentacles was a first.

As Yuria involuntarily stepped back, tense—

"Miss Yuria!"

A voice instantly eased her tension.

"I-Ian!?"

A flush of relief lit up Yuria's face.

"Ha, ha!"

Just hearing Ian's voice made all her tension disappear at once.

— SLUMP!

Yuria's legs gave out beneath her and she sat right down.

"So it was you! Ian Greysel... Haah..."

She breathed a sigh of relief as she saw Flostilla gripped in Ian's hand.

'Ah...! Then that, too!'

She finally recognized Vladiark.

'That was Ian's greatsword... Wow, I didn't know it could turn into something like that.'

Vladiark had now cleaned up all the demons and, as if savoring the meal, was wriggling its tentacles.

Honestly, it looked a bit grotesque.

'... It doesn't really suit Ian, though... Why did the Sword Lake bestow that sword to him?'

Still,

Both blade and master being monsters—at least that was a point they had in common.

To have so overwhelmingly shredded a Master-rank demon in an instant—

And the demon hadn't even been alone—he had a capable subordinate.

'He's gotten so much stronger these last few months. Ian Greysel.'

When Ian fought late-stage Swordmaster Dellen—

It hadn't felt this overwhelming.

He'd had to use every single technique, risking his life.

He'd even blocked Dellen's blade with his own body.

But now—

'He didn't spill a drop of blood, yet he overwhelmed a Master-rank demon.'

Even the subordinate, who seemed competent, had been instantly shredded by Ian's Flostilla.

'The only thing different from before...'

Was that Ian now wielded two named swords, and that only a few months had passed.

'Can one really become this much stronger in just a few months, with two swords...?'

Even Yuria, praised as a genius and chosen by the Divine Sword, couldn't have so thoroughly defeated two demons with Genesis in hand.

If anything, she would probably have lost.

'But Ian...'

How had he gotten so strong, so quickly?

"Miss Yuria!"

Ian crashed through the bushes to reach her.

"Yes! Here! I'm here!"

"Ha, ha..."

Ian let out a breath of relief, seeing that Yuria was unharmed.

"I'm glad I wasn't too late. Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Not at all! Thanks to you."

"Even a small wound should never go untreated. Any sprains or scrapes?"

Seeing Ian's serious, worried face made Yuria chuckle without realizing it.

"Pfft, you worry too much. I'm fine. Really."

— SNAP!

Yuria stood, spinning and showing off every part of her body.

There were some dirt stains, but not a spot of blood.

"You really saved my life, Ian."

She'd truly thought it was over when the demon unleashed his enhanced energy.

"Once again, I owe you. ... But."

Yuria glanced at Flostilla.

"So you're the one who received it."

When the master of a named sword from the Sword Lake dies, the sword's fate is decided by the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Her father must have gifted Flostilla to Ian.

"Ah..."

Ian quickly sheathed Flostilla.

"I'm sorry, miss. I tried not to let you see it."

"Huh? Why?"

Flostilla was the sword of the wet nurse who'd betrayed Yuria.

So it must bring up painful memories.

"... It must feel unpleasant. I wasn't thoughtful enough."

He'd been so anxious seeing the demon ready enhanced energy that, in his haste, he'd used any measure—even Flostilla.

"Oh. Oh, come on, is that all?"

Yuria brushed it off with a wave of her hand.

"Forget it~ Don't worry about me. Why hide a good sword? It'd be worse if you didn't use it because of me. It suits you, anyway."

Yuria tapped Ian on the shoulder.

"And—"

She grinned mischievously.

"I'm actually glad you're the new owner."

... It was once the sword of the person who protected me. But it suits you, too.

If someone else had received Flostilla, I might have felt upset.

But Ian receiving it felt perfectly fine.

"... Is that so?"

"Yeah. So use it however you wish. Show it to me often, okay?"

"Understood. Thank you."

"What's there to thank me for...? I'm the one who owes you."

— CHUCK!

Yuria rested a hand on her hip with a smile.

"How many debts are you planning to hang on me, Ian Greysel?"

"... There's no need for that."

"How can you say that between people? You've saved my life twice now."

"I didn't come hoping for anything in return. I'd say it a thousand times over."

"..."

Yuria's heart fluttered a little.

"Hmph...! That's just talk."

"I mean it."

"T-then could you swear it by mana?"

"Of course. Do you have a scroll? I'll do it right now."

"W-wait! You'll really do it, so I can't even joke!"

— Thump. Thump.

"..."

Yuria glanced sideways at Ian.

'This guy really... when he acts like this...'

He really seems to like me.

He acts like I'm the only one he cares about.

'Honestly.'

If he didn't like me, could he come to save me, every time?

Twice, even? Even revealing his hidden strength?

And he always tries to prove himself, swearing by mana.

If he didn't like me, none of it would make sense.

But...

'It's confusing...!'

She still lacked decisive proof that Ian liked her.

'He's never confessed, after all...'

And the fact that she wasn't the only girl he took care of bothered her the most.

But right now, he seemed to have come to save her before anyone else.

'Ugh...!'

How could the heart be this complicated and desperate?

It wasn't just now—Yuria had been suffering for months, agonizing over Ian's feelings.

'Aagh! I can't stand it any longer! I'm going crazy over this!'

So, she decided to ask directly.

"H-hey, Ian?"

Do you like me?

Chapter 94 : Deserted Island Attack (6)

Deserted Island Attack (6)

Ian's true feelings were confusing.

Yuria was so anxious that she couldn't stand it any longer.

So she decided to ask him directly.

Ask Ian.

If he liked her.

"Um, Ian!"

"Yes?"

"You know..."

"Yes."

"So... um..."

"...?"

"U-Um...!"

But when she tried to ask, the words just wouldn't come out.

Her lips just trembled in embarrassment.

She felt like Ian liked her...

But what if it was all just a misunderstanding...?

Then... wouldn't this be a really weird question...?

Maybe Ian only saved her out of loyalty to her father.

He might even think she was full of herself or delusional.

'Why did you make such a ridiculous assumption...?'—he might find her unpleasant!

Ian might want to keep his distance from her from now on.

He wouldn't want to be next to a girl who let her imagination run wild and caused misunderstandings.

This moment could end up as a deep embarrassment, making her want to kick her blanket for years.

'U-Urgh! B-But...!'

Even if she had to take those risks—

The more dangerous it was, the more courageous Yuria became.

'Nothing can be gained without risk! Without courage, nothing is possible!'

Yuria had been raised as a swordswoman since birth.

Courage was a basic quality for a swordswoman.

Without courage, she'd be a corpse.

The only thing she'd worked hard to cultivate since she was little was her courageous heart.

'It's always the desperate one who should be brave...!'

Yes. If she didn't muster up the courage now, she might never be able to learn Ian's true feelings.

Yuria wanted to know how Ian really felt.

Ian was trying to hide it.

Then, she had to be the one to be brave.

Even if this question put distance between her and Ian—

A-ah, I won't regret it!

At least this ticklish, burning feeling in her heart might be resolved...?

'N-No...'

No...

'No!'

Honestly, saying she wouldn't mind if they grew apart was a lie.

'... I-I don't want to grow apart.'

That was what made her so afraid.

Yuria admired Ian for his shining talent, even greater than her own.

And as she and Ian shouldered the suffocating expectations of those around them together, she'd started to feel a sense of kinship with him.

She felt reassured and grateful that this extraordinary, talented boy always came to rescue her whenever she was in danger.

Whenever they talked, she always felt a strange sort of joy and a satisfying fullness in her heart.

All these feelings Ian gave her—comfort, reassurance, and those fluttering sensations—

Yuria didn't want to be separated from any of them.

Maybe, from the time she was very little, these were exactly the things that Yuria had sincerely wished and prayed for.

If possible, she wanted to get even closer.

That's why she was so eager to know his heart, and why her own was so desperate.

If she could just know Ian's true feelings... just know...

She could take another courageous step forward, too.

She could get closer to him, faster.

'So all the more...!'

She had to be brave now.

Before her older sister or brother swooped in and took Ian away while she hesitated.

'Maybe Ian honestly really does like me, you know.'

Maybe it's not just a misunderstanding after all.

And even if Ian distances himself from her because of this question—

Surely, if she did her best, there would always be a chance to rebuild her relationship with him.

That process might be a bit painful, but...

Even so, now was the moment to muster courage.

She had to gather her courage and check Ian's true feelings.

"Ian, you..."

"Yes. Please, go ahead."

"Do you l...! Li...!"

But her lips wouldn't cooperate as she wished.

"L-Li!"

"..........??"

"Li—like, do you lik...!"

As Yuria struggled to force her stiff lips to part and finally open her mouth—

"Iaaaaan! Young master Iaaaan!!!"

"Wh-What!?"

Sophia's voice cut off Yuria's words from a distance.

— Rustle! Rustlerustle!

"Haah, haah! Ian! Young master Ian!"

Sophia burst through the foliage, leaning on a tree to catch her breath.

"How could you rush off all by yourself like that! That's dangerous... huh!"

Sophia met Yuria's eyes and suddenly held her breath.

"Miss Yuria!?"

"... You!"

— Rustlerustle!

Soon, Charlotte appeared through the bushes behind Sophia.

"Huff! Y-Yuria!?"

"My sister, too...!?"

Yuria blinked her large eyes and stared at Ian.

"Ian!? Were you with them all along?"

"What! Did you just call your older sister 'them'!? I told you not to talk to your sister like that, didn't I @!#%!!"

Charlotte immediately started yelling, but Yuria didn't hear a single word.

'W-What! Ian Greysel!'

Suddenly Yuria was infuriated.

'You, you clearly told me...!'

Not to lock arms with other boys, not to hold their hands.

To avoid getting close with any boys.

So up until now, she hadn't even exchanged words with other boys!

But what is he doing now!?

'He's just doing whatever he wants!?'

She could let it slide with Sophia since last time he swore they weren't in a relationship, so fine, she could make an exception...

'But now, even my big sister!? All hugging and giggling together!?'

Honestly, she was already uncomfortable with how he stuck with Sophia, but she had forced herself to endure.

Since they insisted they weren't dating, she didn't want her own jealousy to harm their close friendship—she had worked hard to think that way.

But now he was hanging out with her sister Charlotte, too?

Why were there more and more girls around him!!

Was he planning to just say Charlotte was a friend too!?

There's no such thing as being just friends between a boy and a girl!

... Hmph.

Yuria pouted and stuck out her lower lip.

"... Ian... You tr-traitor..."

"... Yes?"

"... Traitor... traitor...!"

"...???"

Ian blinked at Yuria in bewilderment.

... Sometimes Yuria's thoughts are really hard to understand.

I felt that way in my previous life, and the same was true even as I see her after growing older.

But anyway.

Now that Sophia and Charlotte have joined, and Yuria's caught her breath for a bit.

Break time was over.

It was time to rush to save Kargon.

— KWAAAAAANG!!!

Aris's enhanced energy shook the barrier again.

"Ugh...!"

Yuria frowned at the ear-splitting roar that felt like it would tear her eardrums.

"Miss Yuria. We must move, right now."

"Move? Where? Are you saying we can get outside now?"

"No."

Ian shook his head.

"First, we have to rescue young master Kargon. Only then can I guide you out of the barrier."

"... Huh? What!? What did you just say?"

Yuria's eyes and mouth opened wide.

"The demons weren't targeting only me!?"

"Yes. The demons came after both me and Lady Charlotte as well."

"Ah...! Ah!"

So that's why Charlotte was with Ian...

No! That's not what matters now!

"They're after Kargon too!?"

"Yes. We need to hurry. Every second counts. The demons are still on the move."

As Ian said this, he hoisted both Sophia and Charlotte over his shoulders.

"W-Whoa! Young master, that's ticklish! Hold here, not there!"

"... E-Excuse me, one more time, young master Ian."

The two naturally let themselves be lifted onto Ian's shoulders.

"W-What are you doing?"

It was a rather bewildering sight for Yuria.

"You said we had to move quickly, right?"

"Yes. To move as quickly as possible. Excuse me for a moment, miss Yuria."

Ian walked up behind Yuria.

"W-What are you doing!?"

Before Yuria could even turn to look, he slipped his head between her legs and hoisted her up into a piggyback position.

"W-Whaaaa!?"

Yuria clung tightly to Ian's hair, barely keeping her balance.

"W-What are you doing!? Put me down!"

"No. We're going like this."

He was sorry for Yuria, but there was no time to ask for her consent.

"Hold on tight—hair, ears, whatever you can!"

"A-Are we seriously going like this!?"

Ian now had three people hanging from him.

For most people, forget running—they'd have trouble just standing up.

"Is this for real!?"

Charlotte answered Yuria's incredulous question for her.

"Just hold on tight, Yuria! You'll see in a second!"

"What...?"

"Then, let's go!"

At Sophia and Charlotte's signal, they gripped Ian's collar tightly.

"Wh-What!?"

Swept up in the mood, Yuria clutched Ian's chest for dear life.

— BOOOOOOM!!

At the same time, Ian kicked off the ground with all his might.

"U-UAAAAAAAH!!!"

Utilizing the Extreme Point principle of the Frenzied Insight Style, Ian condensed his aura to the limit at a single point for ultra-high speed movement.

It was so fast Yuria's eyelids felt like they were flipping inside out.

Before she knew it, she found herself clutching Ian's neck tightly.

"Ugh!"

Momentarily out of breath, Ian grit his teeth and kept running.

The corners of his mouth rose a little.

Running through the forest with Yuria in a piggyback like this...

It brought back some distant memories of his past life.

* * *

At a cliffside on the deserted island—

"This thing. Every time I use it, I realize how convenient it is."

A demon with a big hooked nose was fiddling with a demon artifact, muttering to himself.

"To think it could put this many people to sleep at once."

In front of the hooked nose, more than ten men and women were sprawled out on the ground.

All had been caught by the hooked nose's sleep dark magic artifact.

Among them were Kargon, his followers, and the instructors who had stayed to protect them.

— KWAAAAAANG!!

At that moment, Aris shook the barrier again.

"Tsk...!"

The bald demon next to him winced at the ear-splitting roar that seemed like it would rip his eardrums out.

"What are you, writing your impressions!? Just collect the target already! Before we leave you behind!"

"Tch, always so impatient... Fine."

The hooked nose clicked his tongue at his impatient companion.

He walked among the fallen men and women and slung Kargon over his shoulder.

Then, looking down at the unconscious trainees and instructors on the ground, he spoke.

"What about the rest?"

The swordsmen of Hisperion could someday become a threat to the demons.

A rare chance to nip those growing sprouts in the bud.

"Should we kill them before we go?"

— KWAAAAAANG!!

"No! We don't have time for that, you idiot!"

The bald demon snapped irritably.

"Do you think the barrier will hold!? We need to get back even a second faster! Move it!"

— WHOOSH!

After spitting out his words, he dashed off into the forest.

"Tsk."

The hooked nose demon clicked his tongue with regret as he looked at the unconscious students and instructors, then quickly followed after him.

— Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

— WHOOSH! WHOOSH!

With every step, the scenery of the forest sped by.

On their way out, the demons ran into no instructors at all.

The bald demon's ability, specializing in detecting others' presence, was to thank for that.

It took them about three minutes to reach the rendezvous point where the escape portal was located.

"Why's nobody here?"

The hooked nose muttered, glancing around the meeting area.

"There's not a soul in sight?"

No leader. No other comrades.

He couldn't sense any presence either.

"Haah, damn it! We were the first to arrive!?"

The bald demon spat on the ground in frustration.

Then—

— KWAAAAAANG!!

With another powerful blow from Aris shaking the barrier—

— CRACK!!

A foreboding sound rang out from the barrier.

"W-What!?"

"N-No!"

Both demons reflexively looked up at the sky.

And what they saw was a vivid crack.

"T-The barrier!?"

"D-Damn it...!"

A bolt-like crack was splitting the barrier wide open.

The barrier was on the verge of shattering.

Chapter 95 : Empty House (1)

Empty House (1)

- KWAH-AAAAAAANG!!

Aris relentlessly struck the barrier.

- KADUDEUK!!

At last, cracks appeared in the barrier.

"Th-that!? Look, it's cracked!!"

The hooked-nose demon looked up at the barrier in shock.

The barrier now looked like it could shatter at any moment.

"H-how much longer can it hold?!"

"A-at most thirty...! No, not even twenty seconds!"

If Aris swung her enhanced energy once more, the barrier would shatter immediately.

"We have to escape! At least us!!"

The bald demon hurriedly dug into the ground.

Soon, a broad flagstone buried in the ground was revealed.

This too was a demon artifact provided by the cult.

It was an escape portal device.

"W-we're just escaping by ourselves!? Can we handle that!? If the boss finds out, we're dead!"

"Then what do you suggest! The others are nowhere in sight! Hurry up and help!"

With his hand on the flagstone, the bald demon urged roughly.

"D-damn it!"

Now that the barrier was cracked, the hooked-nose demon had no time to weigh things deeply.

In the end, he too put his hand on the flagstone.

— KURURURUK!

— KURURURUK!

As they infused their demonic energy together,

— JYUAAAK!

With a stench of rotten sulfur, a red portal shot up from the flagstone.

"It's up!"

Their combined demonic energy could maintain the portal for only about 7 seconds.

"Hurry!"

The bald demon hastily grabbed the portal device.

"W-what! You're taking that too!?"

The hooked-nose demon grabbed the other's shoulder.

"If you take that with us...!"

Any comrades left here would lose their means of escape.

"The rest are as good as dead already, idiot!!"

Once the barrier broke, Aris would storm this place immediately.

A grandmaster's magic sense was beyond imagination.

Moreover, demon artifacts released abundant demonic energy whenever used.

Aris would be sure to check this place first, where demonic energy was thickest.

"It's not our fault those who didn't make it till now are late!"

With the grandmaster's terrifying speed, she would probably arrive within ten seconds of the barrier breaking.

Leaving the portal device behind in such a situation was insane.

If even one comrade was taken prisoner, Aris would use them to reopen the portal and track it back to the hideout.

In that case, everyone would be doomed—no escape for anyone.

"No time! If you want to live, run!"

In the face of the disaster called a grandmaster, the demons could do nothing once the barrier fell.

Comrades or not, they needed to flee to survive.

"U-uhh!!"

Even without lengthy explanation, the hooked-nose demon understood quickly.

"Shit! Fine! FINE! We're really leaving with nothing here!"

All they'd secured was a single target.

They'd lost as many as six comrades.

Trading one target for six comrades.

'No matter what, the boss should have made it back...!'

There was a dangerous prisoner in the hideout that only the boss could handle.

'If we go back alone... How can just the two of us handle her...?'

At that moment.

- KWAH-AAAAAAANG!!

- KWAJAZAZAZAJAJAK!!

Aris's enhanced energy shattered the barrier to pieces.

"N-nooo!! It's broken!!"

"Q-quick! Run!! RUN!!!"

In panic, the demons hurled themselves into the portal.

Comrades, prisoners, everything else was secondary.

Survive first, worry about the rest later.

— UUUNG!

— UUUUUNG!

A tingling static ran through their bodies; in an instant, their surroundings changed.

The lush forest vanished, replaced by the darkness of an underground space.

"Close the portal!! Quickly!!"

"I know!! I know, damn it!!"

The bald demon hastily withdrew the demonic energy from the device.

— SHUUUUUUUK!

As the energy was withdrawn from the device, the red portal shrank rapidly.

In a flash, it was so small that not even an adult woman could pass through.

"H-ha...!"

Now, even if Aris made it to the portal, she couldn't cross over.

Only then did the hooked-nose demon let out a sigh of relief.

— UUUUUNG!!

— PAAAT!!

Something shot out from the portal's small opening like a bullet.

"What!?"

"What the—!"

— CHIIIIIK!!

Something slid across the floor, swiftly brushing past the two demons.

They instinctively tracked it with their eyes.

"Wha...?"

It was a person.

Thick, muddy gray hair.

Black eyes.

Ian Greysel.

"I-Ian Greysel!?"

"H-how the hell is HE here!?"

The demons instantly recognized Ian.

He was one of the targets of this raid.

There was no way they could fail to recognize him.

'Why is HE here!?'

He should have been the D team's target.

If he was to appear, it should have been dragged in by D team—why is he showing up alone!?

'Ah!'

The demons' gaze dropped to Ian's waist.

'He isn't wearing a belt!'

The training hall belts distributed to check cadet status.

Ian was not wearing his.

He had ripped it off immediately after the demons' barrier went up.

'So that's why D team....'

The demons' trackers worked by following magic stones embedded in the targets' belts.

If Ian took his belt off right away, then the trackers were useless—of course D team couldn't find him.

That's why they failed to find Ian and didn't return in time.

'He must have grasped the situation as soon as our barrier appeared and ripped off his belt.'

A bold and quick decision.

In this exam, tearing off the belt on your own meant a penalty of 5,000 points for cheating.

A typical cadet would fear the risk and never dare.

But Ian, upon seeing the situation, immediately judged he needed to use his aura and ripped off the belt sealing his power.

'Gifted people really are sharp, even with details like that.'

But then, why go so far as to chase them through the portal?

'If he'd taken off the belt, he could have stayed safely hidden somewhere by himself.'

The bald demon chuckled to himself.

'Heh. Don't tell me he's come to rescue his friend? Did he throw himself through the portal just to save Kargon, without thinking ahead?'

If so, what a noble kid.

'How touching. All for a friend... truly a tear-jerking sense of justice.'

And foolishly reckless, to an absurd degree.

'What—does he think he can do alone?'

The portal had already closed.

Ian could neither return to the island nor receive help from those on the island.

And by himself, he would be helpless against the demons.

'Don't tell me he thinks he can win with just his own talent?'

Then he really was naïve and arrogant.

'Do people gush about his genius so much that he thinks he can solve everything just by trying?'

Ian was indeed considered one of the continent's top prodigies.

He had proven his brilliant talent by overwhelming Yuria, said to be a natural genius, during the entrance exam to the Sword Dragon Hall.

But—

'Talent that hasn't fully bloomed is worthless in real combat.'

Ian's level was known to be at the lower end of Expert.

Whereas both demons were at the peak of Expert.

'And that kid... he doesn't even have a weapon!'

Indeed, Ian was unarmed.

Lower in level than the demons and without even a decent weapon.

On top of that, his real combat experience must be far behind theirs.

To these demons forged in carnage, Ian looked like nothing but a tasty feast.

'Easy prey. There's no need for both of us; one is enough.'

With a wicked grin, the bald demon sneered.

'... What luck!'

A tasty bonus had walked right into their hands.

'Since he's come all the way here himself, let's give him a good lesson in return.'

Let him learn that talent alone can't solve everything.

'I'll break his pride—and take his limbs as payment for my lesson.'

— SRRRING!

The bald demon drew his sword.

"I'll take him."

"Suit yourself."

— STEP. STEP.

Sword in hand, the bald demon walked slowly toward Ian.

He had always been plagued by inferiority to the gifted.

Becoming a demon was the product of countless failures and frustrations over his lack of talent.

So, the thought of shattering the future of a continent-level genius with his own hands filled him with savage joy.

"Kh, heh heh...!"

The bald demon cackled, shuddering with anticipation.

'I thought this raid was a total loss, but thanks to this guy, it's not so bad. I can take comfort in that much.'

See if your precious talent can withstand this sword, Ian Greysel.

No matter how gifted you are, you can't defend against my sword right now!

With these ordinary hands, I'll dirty your wretched gift!

No matter how you resist, your limbs already belong to me!

— SHWEAAAK!!!

The bald demon lunged, bringing the sword down on Ian's shoulder.

However—

— TAP.

"……!"

"What!"

A lifetime's worth of force—blocked with ridiculous ease.

With just two fingers.

Ian caught the demon's sword between just two fingers.

"Light."

Ian's voice was laced with scorn.

"Wh-What!? "

Blood vessels burst in the demon's eyes.

"How—what is this!?"

Desperately, the bald demon tried to pull his sword back, but it was stuck as if caught in a rock crevice.

"Ughh!!"

Even gripping it with both hands, he couldn't budge it.

— KWA-AAK!

Ian didn't let go of the demon's sword even a little.

"This won't be difficult."

— SUUK!

Ian reached into subspace and pulled out Vladiark.

"W-what—!?"

"Danger! Retreat, idiot!"

"Uh...!"

Too late.

— KWAJIK!

Ian's Vladiark sliced right through the demon's arms.

"Guh!? U-AAAHH!!"

His arms severed, the bald demon collapsed backwards.

— KWADEUK!

Ian brought Vladiark straight down onto the demon's chest.

"Kkh! KUHRK! KUHRRK!"

— SHUA-AAAAK!

Like a drain sucking up water, Vladiark devoured the demon, swallowing him whole and smoky in an instant.

"H-huh...!?"

Shocked stiff, the hooked-nose demon held his breath.

He nearly collapsed on the spot from weak knees.

"A-agh!"

He quickly pulled himself together.

'I'll die here!'

If he didn't move, he would die.

As he slung Kargon up as a potential hostage—

— TU! KWANG!

"Ghh—AAGH!?"

Ian blasted forward like a cannon, grabbed the demon by the throat, and smashed him against the wall before the demon could blink.

"KKHH!? KRRRR!"

Gripped by the boy's small hand by the throat, the demon couldn't breathe and trembled.

'Wh-what monster strength is this...!? K-KKAK!?'

It felt less like a human hand, more like the jaws of some beast.

"S-spare... K-KKHH! Spare me...!"

The hooked-nose demon managed to gasp a plea for his life.

— KWADEUDEUDEUK!

"KUH—KKHK! S-STOP! K-KUUUHK!?"

But Ian, showing no mercy, squeezed harder and harder.

"KKKHK!? Kghk!!"

The demon clawed at Ian's arm with all his might.

But Ian's arm was like an ancient tree—not budging an inch.

Ian kept crushing the demon's throat against the wall.

— KWADEUDEUDEUK!

— CHUUK.....

The demon's limbs went limp as he hung like a broken doll.

— FWIP!

Ian tossed the demon's corpse to Vladiark.

— SRURURUK! SRURUK!

Vladiark sent out its tendrils and devoured the corpse hungrily.

"..."

With that, the two demons were finished.

'The others...? Any more?'

Ian spread his sense, scanning the surroundings.

He sensed no additional presence.

It seemed these two were all the demons here.

'Now then...'

Time to recover Kargon.

'I'll search this place after I'm done with first aid.'

He wasn't sure whether this was a temporary camp or the main hideout yet.

But if this was where the elite demons who had attacked Hisperion stayed, there was likely a vault containing many demon artifacts and treasures.

'I'll find everything and take it all.'

If he found a good demon artifact, it would greatly help in preparing for future battles against the demon race.

Now was the time to claim the spoils.

Chapter 96 : Empty House (2)

Empty House (2)

'First...'

Ian first checked the condition of Kargon, who was lying on the floor.

He felt for a pulse, then placed his hand under Kargon's nose.

'... Thank goodness. It's not serious.'

Although Kargon was unconscious, neither his pulse nor breathing presented any serious issue.

However—

'He needs first aid.'

Kargon's mana circuits were contaminated by turbid demonic energy.

'If left untreated, it could be dangerous.'

Demonic energy, in itself, is no different from an extremely harmful poison.

It rots the flesh and blood of living beings, and sickens the mind.

Severe inflammation had already appeared on Kargon's body.

His blood vessels were swollen and bulged purple.

Around them, small blisters had appeared.

If left unattended, necrosis would soon set in.

If treatment was delayed, he could end up either feeble-minded or crippled.

'Still, treating this isn't difficult.'

It only required cleansing the demonic energy with aura.

— Swish.

Ian laid Kargon straight and placed his hand over his dantian.

The process of cleansing demonic energy is similar to purifying turbidity from the body.

Normally, it's not easy.

Furthermore, cleansing demonic energy from someone else's body, not one's own, is even more difficult.

But—

For Ian, who possessed the enlightenment of a peak-stage swordmaster, it wasn't that difficult.

— Fwoooosh...!

Ian gently infused aura into Kargon's dantian.

Extremely delicately, so as not to damage the dantian or the mana circuits by mistake.

He carefully traced along Kargon's mana circuits, dissolved the demonic energy stuck like clots, and gently expelled it through Kargon's breath.

"Ugh... nngh..."

Soon, Kargon's face noticeably relaxed.

Though the swollen blood vessels and blisters had not subsided yet, now that the source of inflammation was removed, these would soon heal.

With Hisperion's blessed recuperative powers, he would greatly improve after just one day.

'Alright, that's the first aid done.'

Now, what remained was to plunder the spoils in this area—

And to return safely to Hisperion.

'First, let's check the portal. See if it can be reopened.'

If the closed portal could be reopened, then returning to Hisperion would not be a problem.

"....."

Ian picked up the portal artifact from the floor.

Two fairly thick, flat stone slabs.

'Ah... damn it.'

He had half-expected it, but indeed—

It looked like returning through this portal was out of the question.

This portal device was a demon artifact Ian often saw in his previous life.

It was a magic tool set that came in pairs.

You would install one at each desired location, infuse demonic energy, and a portal would form linking the two slabs.

In other words, for both slabs to be together in one place...

'Those demon bastards must have retrieved the portal stones when escaping from the uninhabited island.'

Did these guys not have the faintest sense of camaraderie?

By taking the portal stones, they surely knew the comrades left behind on the island would have no means of escape, and thus be doomed.

"Tsk."

Well... then again.

Demons would hardly have that sort of comradery.

They would betray or sell off anything for their own desires.

That is how they live, stealing the world's precious treasures to offer to their wicked demonic cult.

Truly the enemy of humanity and the world.

The cancer that eats away at humanity and the future.

Trash that must be thoroughly eliminated.

"Haah..."

Ian let out a short sigh.

'Still, just in case...'

Might as well check.

The two may not be a set.

They could each be connected to different locations.

Ian tried activating the stone slabs with demonic energy absorbed into Vladiark.

— Zzzaaaak!

"Ah."

But indeed, as expected.

Two portals arose simultaneously on the stone slabs.

They were definitely a set.

'Shit...'

Returning through the portal was now certainly impossible.

Getting home had become much more troublesome.

'Well... it can't be helped. I'll have to find another way.'

Ian accepted the situation.

'First, I should figure out where this place is.'

He hoped he wasn't too far from Hisperion.

'Let's grab whatever is here and get out quickly.'

Ian had traveled every corner of the continent in his previous life.

Just stepping outside and seeing the natural features or building styles, he might be able to guess where he was.

'I have to return to Yuria and Sophia as quickly as possible.'

He was anxious about having left them back on the deserted island.

'By now, Aris should have sorted out the island's situation, so that place should be safer than here...'

Still, unless he was by their side himself, he couldn't feel at ease.

Especially with the sly Aris near them—it was unsettling in itself.

Of course, if Aris truly intended to do anything to them, whether Ian was there or not, she would've acted long ago, so if there had been no trouble so far, there probably wouldn't be any for a while.

'Still, I'm anxious.'

It was impossible to be complacent when it came to matters concerning them.

Ian decided to move quickly.

'First, find their vault.'

If this was a demonic hideout, there should be plenty of demon artifacts stored.

Among them, there might be something that could help him return to Hisperion.

For example, an artifact that made one's body feather-light, or allowed one to breathe underwater.

If he could get even one such item, the way back home would be much easier.

Moreover, they would be handy for future battles with the demons.

Of course, a lot of luck was required to find such useful artifacts.

'Gotta hurry.'

First, he needed to get out of this musty, humid room.

— Swish.

Ian hoisted Kargon onto his back and walked into the deep darkness toward the doorway.

* * *

Exiting the room, he found himself in a dark corridor.

The only light came from faintly glowing stones set in the ceiling.

It was very dark, but at this level, Ian could easily pierce the darkness with aura.

— Thud. Thud. Thud.

Ian moved, carrying Kargon on his back.

There were two other rooms along the corridor.

— Creek...

He opened the doors: one was a barracks with beds lined up; the other was tightly locked with a thick padlock.

'This isn't an ordinary lock.'

It was a padlock reinforced with dark magic.

Apparently, there was something important in this room.

— Kwajik!

Breaking the padlock was no trouble.

Ian smashed it with Vladiark—dark magic or not, it split cleanly in two.

— Creek...

The door opened, revealing a trove of treasures.

"Oh..."

The locked room was the demons' vault for valuables.

'Just as I thought. Something like this had to be here.'

On crude wooden shelves, there were gold bars, statues, weapons and armor, and artifacts on display.

'Most of it's low-grade, though.'

More than half was low-quality stuff he wouldn't use even if given for free.

The displayed weapons weren't much better than stuff from ordinary shops, and the artifacts looked like the sort of junk that would fool only amateurs.

This was only a small demon group led by a early-stage Master-rank leader, so it made sense they wouldn't have anything great.

'So, nothing in here will help me get home.'

— Disappointed.

Unlucky.

'... But there are still some things worth taking.'

Ian quickly gathered only the useful items.

Gold bars and gems that could be used for travel expenses.

A simple forearm guard and pauldron for temporary use.

The armor contaminated with demonic energy was purified with Vladiark before he put it on.

There were also demonic energy orbs, the demons' exclusive elixirs.

— Clang!

Ian immediately fed all the demonic energy orbs to Vladiark.

— Wriggle wriggle!

Vladiark consumed mana and demonic energy indiscriminately.

It would probably feed on holy power used by clerics just as eagerly.

'In all sorts of ways, this greatsword perfectly matches the Authority of Projection.'

Since the Authority of Projection can use any type of energy—mana, aura, demonic energy, holy power—for fuel, storing demonic energy in Vladiark would allow for future use as needed.

'That should be enough.'

The rest were of dubious quality—miscellaneous weapons, artifacts, crude poisons.

Taking them would only be a burden, so he ignored them all.

'Now then...'

Just as Ian was about to leave the room—

— Clink clink...

"...?"

A faint sound of chains.

So faint that only Ian's keen hearing could have picked it up.

"....."

Ian looked toward where the sound had come from.

The very end of the vault.

The sound came from under the floor beneath a weapons chest.

'What is that?'

— Thud. Thud.

Ian approached.

— Clatter! Crack!

He moved the chest aside.

"Huh?"

An exclamation slipped out involuntarily.

'W-what is this?'

A secret door was hidden in the floor.

A bizarre secret hatch, plastered with talismans.

'This is...'

Ian knelt on one knee and examined the talismans in detail.

'These are for concealing magic power.'

He had used these talismans often in his previous life.

'What could possibly be down there?'

What was hidden below, that they'd have to use so many talismans to conceal its magic?

— Tear! Rip!

Without hesitation, Ian tore off all the talismans.

"...!"

Once the talismans were removed, a surge of overwhelming energy burst from below the hatch like spring water.

'This is...!'

At least Grandmaster-rank energy.

'But it's not demonic energy.'

There was none of the telltale musty stench of a demon.

Instead, it felt denser, fishier, sharper, and colder.

'A vampire.'

Vampiric energy mixed with magic power felt just like this.

— Clank!

The chain sound again.

It came from right under the hatch.

'... Should I check it out?'

There was definitely something big down there.

But—

'The energy is very strong.'

Checking it out could be a life-or-death matter.

'Still, it's not completely beyond my power.'

The pressure was at about Grandmaster rank.

Comparable to Aris Hisperion.

'With Flostilla and Vladiark at this level, I should be able to manage.'

Ian wasn't on the low end even as a Master, and with the Authority of Projection's accumulation of various traits, plus doping from things like Elder Vampiric Sense, he wasn't without chances against the unknown being below.

'Alright. Let's check it out.'

What were the demons hiding here?

It might even be an opportunity to eliminate an important figure for the Demonic Race.

If it wasn't an enemy, but a prisoner, it could be a chance to rescue a Grandmaster-rank captive from the demons.

Either way, this was an opportunity—

And opportunities like this couldn't simply be ignored.

This was a risk well worth taking.

Opportunities always come with risk.

— Creeeak...!

Ian carefully opened the trapdoor.

— Whoosh...!

A thick smell of mold, and a powerful surge of blood energy.

'C-crazy...'

Now that the door was open, the pressure was clearer and stronger.

It seemed the presence below was much closer than he'd thought.

At this distance, the being below must have already sensed Ian as well.

'Let's try going down carefully...'

It was too late to turn back.

Ian slowly climbed down the ladder leading below.

"... Ho."

About a third of the way down, a voice echoed up from the deep darkness below.

"... Back already?"

An alluring woman's voice.

But it sounded weak, as if exhausted.

"What...?"

At the sound, Ian unconsciously let out a small exclamation.

'Th-this voice...!?'

It was a voice Ian knew.

The voice of a comrade who had fought with him until the very end in his previous life.

'S-Scarlet!?'

It was the voice of one of the many heroes who had thrown themselves with Ian against the Grand Dukes of the Demon Realm in humanity's final war.

Damn it, it's getting closer and closer to becoming a harem...

I am not amused...

【(ᗢ_ᗢ)】

Chapter 97 : Crimson Bond (1)

Crimson Bond (1)

Scarlet.

Her full name was Scarlet Ravierre.

A member of the vampire clan that had fallen at the hands of the demons.

She was a high-ranking vampire of the Noxcar bloodline.

She possessed a powerful blood ability, freely able to manipulate blood, and she was a pretty good person.

'In our previous lives, we owed each other our lives quite a few times.'

Ian first met Scarlet during the Demon-Human War.

It was after the day Yuria lost her dantian to the Grand Duke of Gluttony and became crippled.

Ian had been working as a bodyguard for guildmaster Serana at Nightingale, an intelligence organization that helped them, to treat the badly injured Yuria.

That was when he first met Scarlet.

At first, when Scarlet came to the guild to buy information, they only saw each other in passing a few times.

But then, one day.

"I need help."

Scarlet asked the guild for help.

"Find some mercenaries to fight with me. I'll pay whatever it takes."

Guild master Serana looked troubled.

"Scarlet, we're not a mercenary guild, we're an intelligence guild..."

"Anyone is fine as long as they're skilled, so at least introduce someone. ..... I've finally found where my family is. I can't possibly manage on my own."

"..... Even if you say that... You know, the current situation."

At the time, humanity was being completely exterminated.

By the relentless invasion of demons pouring out from the Red Gate.

Almost everyone who could have counted as a mercenary was already dead.

Of course, even then, if you looked hard enough, there might have been some survivors.

But Nightingale was as ruined as Hisperion by that point.

They no longer had the intelligence network of the past, so there was no way they could find hidden mercenary troops here and there.

They wanted to grant Scarlet's request, but they simply couldn't.

"..... Is it really impossible? No matter what?"

"I'm sorry, Scarlet. It's an important favor, but I can't do it..."

"..... No, ah... is that so. I suppose there's nothing we can do."

"..... Sorry."

Just as Scarlet was about to leave with an utterly darkened expression.

"I'll go."

Ian stepped forward.

"W-what!?"

He could still vividly recall Serana's flustered expression.

"You, you!? Do you even know where Scarlet's trying to go!?"

"Isn't it where her family is?"

"W-well, that's true!"

It was a place anyone could die.

Scarlet was planning to go deep into the demon realm, to one of the lairs of the most powerful great demons.

But it didn't matter.

"I'll help. I don't need compensation. Demon blood is enough."

It was because Ian felt emotions similar to his own in Scarlet's eyes.

Her feelings for her loved ones. The desperate wish to never lose them, even if it meant giving up everything.

And the anger, hatred, and thirst for revenge against those demons who took her loved ones from her.

Perhaps that was why.

From the moment he first saw Scarlet, Ian felt inexplicably comfortable, as if she was a kindred spirit.

"..... That's not fair, Serana. You had such a decent guy here all along."

"N-no, he's... not even my subordinate..."

"You?"

Scarlet ignored Serana's excuses and slowly walked over to Ian.

"What's your name?"

"Ian Greysel."

"Ian Greysel. Good. I'm Scarlet. Scarlet Ravierre."

Scarlet pointed to her fangs.

"As you can see, I'm a vampire, but I only bite friends when I have their permission. Nice to meet you."

Scarlet reached out her hand for a handshake.

Ian firmly grasped and shook it.

"Thank you so much for helping me, Ian Greysel."

After that, Scarlet and Ian often went out together.

Whenever Scarlet needed help with a difficult task, Ian volunteered to help, and sometimes Scarlet would join Serana and Ian on their expeditions, helping with artifact searches and protection to return the favor.

As they fought together more and more, they became more compatible—so much so that later, together they could even defeat greater demons far stronger than either of them alone.

"There's probably no one else who can sync so perfectly with my Sword Spirit Release as you do, Scarlet."

"Hmph. So cheesy... ... But I don't dislike your style either. I just wish you'd take better care of yourself. Try not to get hurt so much."

They fought for each other's precious things, and for each other's revenge.

In that process, they saved each other's lives countless times.

When Ian was poisoned, Scarlet used her vampiric powers to suck out the toxins, and when Scarlet was tormented by bloodthirst, Ian soothed her with his own blood.

When Ian was severely wounded, Scarlet purified her own blood to heal him. When a spear of sunlight steel—which was lethal to vampires—flew at Scarlet, Ian blocked it with his own body.

After surviving so many battlefields where either would have died without the other...

"....."

It was a bright, moonlit night.

As usual, after finishing a battle, Scarlet was bandaging Ian's wounds and they were chatting lightly...

At some point, their eyes met and Scarlet leaned closer to Ian.

"....."

"....."

Just before their lips touched.

"Scarlet."

Ian grabbed her shoulders.

"..... I'm sorry. I can't do this."

"....."

Scarlet looked flustered for a moment, then frowned.

"..... This is humiliating! I was just trying to do something nice for once!"

Scarlet's eyebrows drooped.

"It's because of that woman, isn't it...? Yuria Hisperion."

"..... Yeah."

"Doesn't seem like you're even actually dating her."

"That's true, too. ... But to Lady Yuria, I'm all she has. Just as she depends on me for everything, I want to focus everything on her, too. ... It's a relationship that's hard to explain in words."

"..... Hmph. No, you don't have to explain. ... Now I can tell what you're thinking just by looking at your eyes."

"....."

"I... want to talk about the old days for a bit. Will you listen?"

"As much as you want."

He listened to her story then.

Truly a story of family.

The Noxcar bloodline was a clan formed over a very long time... one where all sorts of abandoned beings gradually gathered into a family.

Scarlet's gaze drifted to a faraway place as she continued.

"We were really different from other vampires. There wasn't any hierarchy. We were just... vampires who had nowhere else to go, gradually gathering together."

She paused, her expression contorting with emotion, but quickly regained her composure and took a deep breath.

"It's a really old story, but when I was a child, a plague broke out in our village. I got sick too... and, abandoned by my own parents, I was just waiting to die among the corpses, when my sister... that is, the Noxcar big sis who turned me into a vampire, appeared."

At first, she said, the others terrified her. But—

"As time passed, I gradually realized. My sister taught me what a real family is. What it feels like to have a true home..."

Ian listened quietly.

"Old man Marcus in our clan was originally an elder of another bloodline, but got exiled for opposing human genocide. Ellie was born to a strict vampire hunter family, but turned into a vampire herself and almost got killed by her kin. Everyone had a similar story."

But the Noxcar clan accepted one another.

"Blood or background didn't matter at all... Everyone was so kind."

Scarlet bit her teeth together for a moment, then continued.

"I lived together with all of them for a long time. Just like you and me now, we protected each other, treated wounds, shared stories... Those people were everything to me."

Her voice trembled.

"But when the demons attacked our home..."

A harrowing story followed.

The demons hunted the Noxcar vampires.

They needed enormous magic power and powerful sacrifices to summon the Demon Grand Dukes to this world.

"In the end, I'm the only one left like this."

Ian quietly took hold of Scarlet's hand.

Scarlet had lost bonds forged over at least hundreds of years in an instant to the demons.

Ian couldn't even begin to guess at that sense of loss.

When he lost Sophia, it felt as though his heart and his entire body was rotting away alive, but Scarlet had lost far, far more all at once.

If the pain was even several times as much as that... he didn't want to imagine it. It was truly horrific.

"Revenge is all I have left. The demon bastards who killed my family—I'll kill them all. Especially that High Priest of Greed—him I'm going to tear apart with my own hands."

Ian nodded firmly.

It was a promise to help her.

Scarlet looked at Ian and smiled.

"But... lately, I feel strange sometimes. Especially when I'm with you."

"……?"

"After my family died, I never thought I'd ever feel like this again. I thought only of revenge. But when I'm with you, it feels like I've gone back to the old days."

"……."

"That makes it all the more frustrating."

"Uh, huh?"

"You're already pretty much family to me. But I'm not that to you, right? Because you have something even more precious."

"S-Scarlet... I..."

"It's fine. I'm not trying to force anything. Just..."

Scarlet leaned onto Ian's shoulder.

"Until my revenge is done... stay by my side like this. I don't think I could endure it alone."

Listening to her desperate voice, Ian found himself nodding almost unconsciously.

"Of course. I'll always be by your side, Scarlet."

"Sorry. I was a little bit selfish. ... I envy that woman. But... I think now I can finally feel at peace about it."

Even now, Ian could vividly remember the bittersweet smile that crossed Scarlet's face in that moment.

* * *

'That Scarlet is here...?'

The voice echoing from the darkness at the foot of the ladder was unquestionably Scarlet's.

But since he'd only heard two sentences, he couldn't be sure if it was really her.

It could just be a woman whose voice sounded similar, or perhaps he was hallucinating out of longing.

Worst case, it might even be some illusion or charm magic.

'I'll only know for sure if I go down and check for myself.'

— THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!

Ian hurriedly climbed down the long ladder.

Even the narrow passageway was covered in tags designed to conceal magic power.

Apparently, the demons had gone to great lengths to thoroughly hide whoever was down here.

— THUD!

After climbing for a while, Ian finally reached the ground and turned to see the owner of the voice.

And there—

'D-damn it...'

Hair as red as blood cascaded down to the ground. Scarlet irises.

'It's really Scarlet...!'

Scarlet was hanging, crucified on a tall cross.

"..... You are...?"

Scarlet looked down at Ian, frowning.

She had been sure the detestable demon captain would come, but now a boy she'd never seen before was here, and she looked utterly stunned.

"..... Who...?"

"H-haah!"

But Ian didn't have time for a proper introduction.

He had to get Scarlet off that cross immediately.

"Hang on! I'll get you down right now!"

"... What...?"

Scarlet looked confused.

"... What's your game...?"

"What game!"

Ian frantically looked around for something to stand on.

'Damn, there's nothing!'

That's fine. He had Vladiark.

— KLUNK!

He drove Vladiark into the floor and used it as a stepping stone to climb up to Scarlet's eye level.

Then—

"I'll get all of these out right now!"

— SQUELCH! SQUELCH! SQUELCH!

He started pulling out the nails one by one from Scarlet's hands and arms.

"Ugh...! Ngh!"

"A-are you insane...!"

Ian was horrified as he pulled the nails out.

The nails weren't just hammered into her hands and arms.

There were also a bunch driven into her chest and around her heart.

"W-what the...! Those bastards!"

He hadn't expected the demons to imprison Scarlet in such a miserable state.

If he'd known, he would have rushed here immediately to save her!

He would have made those demon bastards die far more painfully.

"... You... what are you...?"

The boy, face on the verge of tears as he pulled the nails from her body.

Scarlet gazed weakly at him, tilting her head.

"... You're not a demon...?"

"Of course not! And we'll talk later! Talking would just hurt you right now!"

One especially large nail was even driven into her lungs.

'How long has she been like this!?'

He couldn't begin to imagine how much pain Scarlet had endured down here.

"....."

Scarlet watched Ian with a complicated expression.

"Grr...! This thing in your chest!"

Ian grabbed the largest nail, lodged in the center of Scarlet's chest.

"Ugh...!"

In that instant, a piercing pain shot through Scarlet, making her grimace.

"I'm going to pull it out in one go! Bear with me!"

When pulling things out of the body—be it an arrow or a blade—it hurt less to do it all at once.

— CRUNCH!!!

"Nh-ugh!?"

Scarlet's eyes rolled back as the final nail came out.

— DRIP...

Losing her support, Scarlet slumped forward.

— THUD!

Ian caught Scarlet gently in his arms.

"Hang in there. Scarlet...!"

Ian, without thinking, called her name.

Scarlet's eyes flew wide open.

"... You, you...! How do you know my name...?"

Scarlet had never told her name to the demons here, and no matter how she looked at him, the boy was a stranger.

"Ah."

Ian realized too late—but now was not the time to worry about that.

"You need blood, right! I'll give you some right now!"

Ian's blood was also targetable with the Authority of Projection.

As long as his magic power held out, he could fill Scarlet's belly endlessly.

"Let's patch your wounds up before anything else!"

Yep, harem route it is...

【ゔ(ㅇ_ㅇ)】

Chapter 98 : Crimson Bond (2)

Crimson Bond (2)

Blood is one of the most essential elements for sustaining life.

That's why Ian had once, in preparation for potential massive blood loss, projected his own blood in advance.

— 《Authority of Projection》 —

◆Item

[Ian Greysel's Blood Lv.52]

————————

A blood grade of a staggering '52'.

Considering that ordinary human blood usually rates only around '10~15', Ian's blood was quite an exceptional figure.

'The reason is probably because...'

The biggest reason was likely the Heavenly Blood Pill he had taken, made from the blood of the Heavenly Sword Lord.

After that, his physical constitution had been elevated by several levels, so his blood naturally became extraordinary as well.

On top of that, factors like his high-born lineage, the reduced impurities of having reached the Master-rank, and the overflowing vitality of his youth—all contributed, amplifying the level of his blood significantly.

'Thanks to that, I can give Scarlet excellent blood. That's a relief.'

High-grade blood was no different from a fine potion for vampires, and at the same time, a tonic that replenished their life force.

It would be a tremendous help in healing Scarlet's injuries.

Of course, manifesting that much blood required a great deal of magic power.

'But this much, I can easily handle.'

Even with the aura he had left, he could create enough blood to match six adult men.

'If that proves insufficient, I can always use the demonic energy stored in Vladiark.'

Vladiark held over twice as much demonic energy as Ian's own aura.

In other words, at his disposal right now was enough blood for no less than eighteen adult men.

'With this much blood supply...'

No matter how starved Scarlet might be, this should be enough to satiate her to some extent.

At the very least, it should be enough to fill all the gaping holes in her body.

'However...'

Whether this would be enough to completely heal her internal injuries was another matter.

Some long-term blood transfusion might be required for that.

'For now, let's do what I can.'

If long-term supply is needed, he could arrange for it then.

He would see to it that Scarlet had a place to stay, and could meet her frequently for further assistance.

But for now, the priority was to close her urgent wounds.

'No reason to hesitate.'

—Swooooosh!

While holding Scarlet in his arms, Ian immediately manifested his blood.

—Splaassh!

Ian's blood rained over her back, seeping straight into her wounds.

"Uh...!?"

Feeling the warmth of the blood, Scarlet's eyes regained their intensity.

"... Bl, blood? Gr, ggh!? Ah... aaah!!"

Pure pleasure rushed into Scarlet through the wounds.

For a vampire, drinking blood after a prolonged thirst was the very peak of rapture.

"Ah, aaah...! Ah!"

Her withering body rejoiced as it was bathed in the rain of life.

A waterfall of pleasure swept through her nerves, sweetly licking every edge.

Scarlet's mouth opened on its own, her tongue quivering.

"Ah, ah...!"

But the taste was cruelly tantalizing.

This body had been starved for so long.

The blood was unbearably sweet, but that only made her hunger more maddening.

She wanted more.

The sweetness only fanned her vampiric instincts to new heights.

More—endlessly more—she wanted to drink until her whole being was filled.

—Crack!

In the end, Scarlet could not resist the temptation and sank her fangs right into Ian's neck.

"Urgh!"

A chillingly sharp pain.

Ian's eyes hardened.

He found himself in a perilously dangerous situation, bitten on the neck by a powerful vampire.

Yet Ian clenched his teeth, remaining calm.

In truth, he'd expected this might happen.

'As I thought... she bit me!'

He'd brought this on himself.

He'd provoked the bloodlust of a vampire left desperately thirsty and exposed his bare neck without defense.

For a vampire tormented by severe thirst, resisting the lure of such fragrant blood was impossible.

Just as a human cannot fight off sleep by sheer will.

After abstaining for so long, with tantalizing drops of blood falling on her parched body, and a fresh boy's slender neck so close—

Even a vampire with monk-like patience would not be able to withstand it.

It was like setting a lavish feast in front of someone starving and letting its aroma fill the air.

Following an irresistible temptation, Scarlet instinctively bit into Ian's throat to take more blood.

This was no longer within the domain of reason.

Scarlet was now likely half-conscious, eyes nearly rolling back in delirium.

"Grr, grrgh!"

—Swooooooosh!!

The wild, greedy sucking of blood thundered in Ian's eardrums.

'Let my guard down and I'll die!'

—Crunch!

Ian quickly swung his left hand back and grasped the hilt of Vladiark.

'I have to use it now...! Demonic energy!'

From the rate at which his blood was being drained, Ian knew his aura alone wouldn't be enough.

He had to immediately draw in Vladiark's demonic energy and project it into blood within his body.

—Swooooooosh!

Ian sucked in Vladiark's demonic energy with his left hand.

"Grgh!"

The instant the energy entered his hand, his skin flamed as if he'd grabbed a burning coal.

Blood vessels bulged grotesquely.

—Ssssss!

But that was not a major problem.

His left arm ached fiercely, but that could be dealt with later.

Ian immediately converted all the demonic energy entering his body into blood.

And just because he used demonic energy to project blood didn't mean it came out tainted.

The Authority of Projection was literally a power to perfectly replicate any object regardless of the kind of magic power used.

With this authority, he could project the purest holy power of a saint, or even the most accursed abyssal magic.

—Clatter!

Then—

Scarlet's embrace grew even tighter.

Her fingers dug into Ian's back as she clung to him.

"Grr, grrgh!"

—Swooooooosh!

Now, even through Scarlet's fingertips, Ian's blood began to be drawn out.

'Are you trying to kill the very person saving you...?!'

Ian gritted his teeth and focused.

An incredible rush of blood drained out, while the Authority of Projection regenerated it in the next instant.

If his projection lagged even for a second, he'd be shriveled dry. If it overshot, his vessels would burst.

He maintained that hair-thin balance with superhuman focus, persevering for what felt like an eternity—

—Thud...

At some point, Ian could feel strength fade from Scarlet's body.

—Tap!

Ian caught her by the waist before she completely collapsed.

"Huu, huuu..."

Scarlet had lost consciousness in his arms.

Ian let out a deep sigh of relief.

"It's over."

It was quite a reckless treatment.

But there had been no choice.

No matter how powerful a vampire's vitality, they were not truly immortal.

She'd had no blood vitality left to heal her life-threatening chest wounds, and left alone, her body would not naturally recover—it would simply vanish. So treating her immediately this way had been the best chance.

'Ugh, ugh... Still, I need to sit down for a bit.'

Fatigue hit him all at once.

He'd poured out too much magic power at once, and his mind was exhausted.

—Rustle.

Ian lightly stepped off Vladiark and gently laid Scarlet down.

"zzZ..."

Having gorged herself on blood, Scarlet was now sleeping as if she were dead.

This too was vampire instinct.

After feasting on blood, a vampire must sleep deeply to convert it into blood vitality.

Though a healthy vampire wouldn't pass out this completely.

Scarlet had been starved to a critical degree, with her blood vitality depleted to the extreme. So her body entered a forced, restorative sleep the moment it absorbed enough blood.

It was like a person who had stayed up for a week straight finally collapsing onto a bed.

'Haa... Anyway, the worst is over for now.'

Scarlet's lethal wounds had all vanished, and the pallor in her complexion was now much improved.

After this sleep, even her internal injuries would likely be much better.

Of course, starvation of such long duration wouldn't be cured with a single infusion. He'd probably need to repeat blood supply a few more times. But it shouldn't escalate to a dangerous level again.

The rampage just now was solely due to her extreme hunger.

Now, she'd eaten enough to at least maintain her reason.

'Now then...'

After a short rest, Ian stood up again.

He decided to look around the room Scarlet had been held in.

Why had the demonic humans imprisoned her here?

What had they been doing to her?

He intended to find out.

'...'

Ian picked up the large spikes strewn across the floor.

'These are...'

They were the very spikes that had been driven into Scarlet's body just moments before.

The nails which had pinned her to the cross.

'... Magic power sealing devices.'

Their true purpose was to block the flow of magic power completely.

To make things worse, they were made of silver, which greatly weakened a vampire's body.

She'd had dozens of these driven into her—all at once.

Even a Grandmaster-rank Scarlet couldn't possibly exert her strength under such constraints.

Her powerful blood-magic and superhuman body had been entirely sealed.

'Hmm...?'

On closer inspection, some were of a different kind.

'This is...'

Ian inspected the larger spikes more carefully.

'A magic power absorption device.'

Ah.

Only then did Ian realize exactly what had been happening to Scarlet here.

'Her magic power was being siphoned away.'

So that they could summon the great demons and grand dukes of the Demon World into this world.

They had used Scarlet as a living magic power generator, squeezing out her power bit by bit just like milking a cow.

'Those bastards.'

They'd probably fed her just enough blood to keep her alive.

That way, they could extract even more blood-magic.

Sometimes, they'd feed her small bits of powerful blood, too.

She needed the vitality to keep producing blood-magic at higher yields.

Having witnessed the actions of the demonic humans countless times in his previous life, Ian could tell instantly.

They had treated Scarlet like a mere tool.

If she was given just enough blood, she'd automatically generate blood-magic for them.

'Then this...'

Ian walked into the darkest corner of the room.

There, an oversized contraption resembling a crouched hippo squatted.

'This must be the device that stored Scarlet's magic power.'

At its center, set like a jewel, was a sphere clearly meant as a storage unit.

'I can feel strong magic power from this.'

The Grandmaster's aura Ian had sensed before entering had been emanating from here.

'I can't leave this behind for the demons.'

—Clink!

Ian raised Vladiark high over his head.

Ready to smash the magic sphere—

'Wait!'

Ian halted Vladiark right before striking.

'Before breaking it...'

He would break it, but first—

'What if... I projected all these?'

Not just the storage device, but all of it.

From the sphere, to the spikes... the restraint devices and the magic absorption gear.

Even the cross that served as the magic transmission device.

'If I round up some demonic humans and demons and chain them up here...'

Could he turn live demonic humans and demons into a demonic energy factory?

'I'm basically building a farm for Vladiark.'

Force-feed captured enemies with cheap potions, forcing them to generate demonic energy.

Turn them into machines for automatic magic production.

Store and extract their magic regularly, funneling it into Vladiark—that would provide an enormous supply of magic power.

Much more than simply killing the demonic humans and demons outright.

It would become an automatic demonic energy plant.

A revolutionary leap, like humanity's shift from hunting to agriculture and livestock.

'It's a pretty good idea.'

Besides, Ian could transform the stored demonic energy into any other type with ease.

Thanks to the Authority of Projection.

He could refine demonic energy into pure mana, or convert it to aura, holy power, or even blood-magic.

'With the right structure and system, I could obtain an astronomical amount of magic power.'

And if he invested that massive magic into developing the magic tower's weapons and artifacts...

'At the very least, we'd never end up on the losing side of the war with the demons just for lack of magic power.'

A blaze of determination lit up Ian's eyes.

'I'll project all of this.'

Ian began projecting every magic extraction device scattered around the room.

It was the beginning of a new vision for Ian.

I give up... It is a harem...

【ง(ᗜ_ᗜ)】

P.S.

Ian's plan to make demonic energy factory is diabolical....

Chapter 99 : To Home (1)

To Home (1)

Now that Scarlet's first-aid treatment was finished, and the spoils had been collected, everything was done.

All the magic tools in the room used to extract magic power had been stored inside the Authority of Projection, and now, all that was left was to go outside.

'Still, just in case, for the last time.'

Ian meticulously searched the hideout, wondering if there might be any more hidden rooms.

Nothing good would come from staying in a place like this any longer, so he moved quickly.

He felt along the floor, infused his enhanced energy into the walls, and even scanned the ceiling.

As a result, it seemed there were no more rooms.

'Makes sense.'

Even the room where Scarlet was imprisoned was a facility far too sophisticated for a small hideout like this.

From the magic tools used to extract magic power, to the concealment talismans.

Each and every one was expensive.

'A facility for sealing and exploiting a high-tier vampire of grandmaster rank, no less.'

There was no way such a terrifying facility could be mass-produced cheaply.

No doubt the demons had poured tremendous amounts of money and resources into these installations.

It was highly unlikely that there would be anything else so costly in a hideout of this size.

'But how did Scarlet end up captured in a place like this?'

It was hard to believe Scarlet had been overpowered and captured by the demons here.

He could say with certainty that those guys would never be a match for Scarlet.

Most likely, Scarlet had been taken prisoner by the highest-ranking demons of the Demon Cult.

And then, perhaps, handed over to the guys here under the pretense of management and support.

'The demons I killed today—unexpectedly, they might've been quite a promising team in the Demon Cult.'

No way the Demon Cult would entrust a powerful vampire like Scarlet to some nobodies.

On the contrary, it was probably because they were such a group that they could so fearlessly attack the Sword Dragon Hall of Hisperion.

If Ian had not appeared as an unexpected factor, those guys' operation would have been a complete success.

'It was bewildering when they showed up out of nowhere.'

But looking at it now, it was lucky, in a way.

He'd managed to eliminate those dangerous guys in advance, and even save Scarlet—his precious companion from his previous life.

'Time to leave.'

There was nothing left for him here.

He had to get out quickly before any more demons showed up.

Ian hoisted Kargon and Scarlet over his shoulders and hurried up the hideout's stairs.

The hideout was only a two-story underground building.

After climbing a bit, he soon saw the main door.

Sunlight was streaming in through the crack under the door.

It must have been broad daylight outside.

It wasn't so different from the time zone of the deserted island.

'So we're not far from the deserted island.'

If it were really far away, day and night would have been reversed.

'I somewhat expected this.'

For the portal device used by the demons, the greater the distance, the more magic energy it needed.

Considering the average proficiency of those guys, they wouldn't have had enough magical vigor left to escape if they fled to a distant place.

Therefore, this was likely still Hisperion territory.

'I have to shield Scarlet.'

Sunlight is extremely harmful to vampires.

Low-level vampires would burn to death instantly upon exposure to sunlight.

Why that is, exactly, is not known.

Some say it's because the original vampire progenitor was cursed by God in a distant past; others say it's because a vampire's life force is of the darkness attribute.

Honestly, whichever it is, it didn't matter much to Ian.

The only important thing was that Scarlet must not be exposed to sunlight.

—Swish!

Ian found a clean robe and put it on Scarlet.

Dressing an unconscious person isn't easy, but since it was a robe, all he had to do was slip her head and arms through, so it wasn't too hard.

In truth, sunlight was not such a deadly threat to a high-rank vampire like Scarlet.

Scarlet's rank was above that of most clan elders, so really, she could probably enjoy sunbathing without issue.

Her body's self-recovery was far faster than the rate at which the sun could destroy her flesh.

But right now, she was too weakened.

To promote faster recovery, he had to cover her and keep her out of the sun.

Just like humans avoid the cold wind when they catch a cold.

'Now, everything's ready. Let's go.'

Ian stood in front of the rusty main gate.

Where did the demons make their base, he wondered?

If it was Hisperion territory, he would report it directly to the head of investigations, Javier, so that the area could be searched.

They might be able to find even more demons.

Maybe even the brokers dealing with the Demon Cult.

It was also possible that a local family managing this area might be involved with the Demon Cult.

—Clunk!

—Creeeeak...!

Ian slowly opened the rusty doors.

Sunlight poured in, diffused through heavy fog.

Immediately, he could see countless buildings in front of him.

'... It's a city?'

He'd thought they might end up in a forest or a cave.

But unexpectedly, their base was right in the middle of a city.

'Here... Ah!'

Ian instantly figured out exactly where this was.

'The west... Kartai City! Damn...!'

The city he had visited months before while searching for Yuria, who had been kidnapped.

Home to a branch of the Dark Mage Association, notorious for its criminal gangs—a cesspool of a city.

The malignant tumor of Hisperion's western region.

This was Greysel territory—his own family's jurisdiction.

'... Hugo.'

For the first time in a while, Ian spat out the name of his biological father.

Normally, in a city, guards would regularly crack down on the Demon Cult and conduct unending patrols, making it difficult for demons to settle in.

But here...

Because Hugo botched budget allocation, law enforcement was wrecked, and there were neither crackdowns nor patrols.

That was why the demons could settle comfortably in a city of Hisperion.

'All the garbage of Hisperion comes from you in the end.'

He truly hated, with every fiber of his being, the fact that he was this bastard's son.

The great ancestors of Greysel had piled up achievements for over a thousand years, and that man alone was dragging it down.

In all respects, he was unfit to manage such a vast western region.

'Which is why, in the end, he was executed in my past life.'

In his previous life, Hugo was executed by Theo not long after the Heavenly Sword Lord went missing.

The Heavenly Sword Lord respected the history and achievements of Greysel, so continued to entrust the west to them and even supported them in various ways, but Theo, the fiery-tempered eldest son of Heavenly Sword Lord, never tolerated such incompetence as Hugo.

'That was... what, about ten or eleven years from now?'

Ten to eleven years.

Far too long to leave Hugo in charge of the west.

'I'll have to get rid of him sooner than in my previous life.'

Or at least kick him out of the lord's seat quickly.

He couldn't let Hugo keep letting Hisperion's west rot away.

He needed to depose Hugo as soon as possible.

Then rally the scattered loyalists of House Greysel,

Restore their dignity as one of the Seven Pillar Families of Hisperion,

And then, submit them to Yuria.

And if Yuria wished to become the next Heavenly Sword Lord again...

This time, as not just a mere knight, but as an elder of Hisperion and pillar of the Seven Houses, he would support her.

'But for that, I'll need to strengthen myself even more at Sword Dragon Hall.'

At very least, he needed to reach grandmaster level to take over House Greysel without incident.

Ian needed power so overwhelming that, even if he publicly killed Hugo, no one would dare oppose him.

'Let's get back. To the Heavenly Sword Palace.'

Ian carried the two on his shoulders and moved briskly.

His destination: Kartai City's Warp Gate.

In truth, a boy as young as Ian walking around in such a crime-ridden hellhole would normally invite trouble.

But—

"....."

"....."

People passing by only gave Ian a sideward glance.

No one blocked his way, nor bumped shoulders with him.

Carrying people over both shoulders must have made him look like a member of some organization.

Since they didn't know his affiliation, no one dared to mess with him.

Causing friction between organizations was a huge headache.

It wasn't Ian's intention, but the walk became easier.

Thanks to that, he soon reached the Warp Gate.

Ian hurried to the ticket counter and spoke to the receptionist.

"To Hisperion Main Residence. Three people. Tickets, please."

"Hm?"

The receptionist, picking his nose, looked at Ian askew.

"So... those two on your shoulders, who are they?"

He pointed at Kargon and Scarlet with the hand he'd just used to pick his nose.

"They seem unconscious... Are they corpses, by any chance?"

Maybe because this was such a crime-infested city, even a joke sounded serious.

Here, people probably did sometimes try to warp while carrying corpses.

"... They're patients. I need to transfer them urgently—please hurry."

"Ah yes, patients~ patients~."

The receptionist hummed as he dragged his feet.

"Aigoo... Why are the forms so far away~. Wait... no, that's not it."

A sly look entered his eyes.

"Are they really patients?"

"What else would they be?"

The receptionist leaned his chin on his hand.

"Who knows? Could be kidnapping, right? This city's pretty creepy, you know? This is kinda suspicious. Should I call the guards?"

"Ah... Hah."

Ian showed a look of annoyance.

He knew why this guy was acting this way.

He was expecting a tip.

Of course...

Even just to buy a ticket, you had to hand over a bribe.

This guy... a public servant, but if he did this in any other city, he'd be instantly fired.

Daring to seek private gain through Hisperion's public facility.

'It's infuriating, but...'

Causing trouble would only delay his return.

"How much do you want?"

"Hm?"

The receptionist's lips curled upward.

"No, it's not the money for the tickets—"

"I understand. I don't have much, but..."

Ian carefully set Kargon down and reached into Scarlet's robe.

—Fwip!

As if drawing a sword, he summoned a [Elegance Armory Longsword Lv.53] worth a whopping 5,000 gold, albeit only temporarily.

"I heard this is a very expensive sword—if I give you this, will you let it go?"

"Uh, uhh!?"

The receptionist jumped up involuntarily.

"Th-this!?"

The pommel bore a distinct brand mark.

'It's the real thing!'

His eyes went wide.

'This is Elegance Armory!!'

An ultra-luxury weapon brand, with equipment that cost thousands of gold each.

Even 1,000 gold was forty times his monthly salary.

'And this longsword wouldn't go for just 1,000 gold...!'

He'd heard that swords of this type were among the most expensive in the Elegance Armory line.

Moreover...

'What a remarkable appearance...! Look at that lustrous sheen...!'

The blade to the tip of the hilt was entirely jet-black, as if housing a mysterious spirit of darkness.

'Could this...! Even go for over 10,000 gold, a top-grade weapon...!'

10,000 gold would be four hundred times his monthly salary.

That was easily over thirty years' worth of wages.

This young boy obviously didn't know the true value.

If he did, he'd never just hand it over like this.

"Wh-what's with this!!"

Afraid the boy might pull the sword back, the receptionist hurriedly accepted it.

"Whoa, scary! I don't know a thing anymore! So! Where to again?!"

He hadn't even taken payment for the tickets yet, but rushed to prepare them.

He wanted to send the boy off before he changed his mind.

Anyway, the profits from selling this sword would more than cover a few tickets.

"To the Hisperion Main Residence. I'm glad you're being cooperative."

"Maybe I misjudged you! Now, now, quickly, quickly! The Hisperion Main Residence is up ahead, to Central Portal 1!"

"Thank you."

Ian lifted Kargon again and headed toward the portal to Hisperion Main Residence.

"Heh, heheheh!!"

The receptionist clapped his hands giddily, watching the boy's departing figure.

"You dumb brat! Idiot! Idiot! He doesn't even know what a treasure this is!"

Even if he asks for it back later, I'll never return it!

I'll feign complete ignorance, ha!

What can he do—he already gave it to me! Hehehe!

"Oh, oh!!"

He admired the sword's sleek lines with wonder.

Its jet-black gleam was nothing short of exquisite and noble.

As the receptionist, entranced, stroked the blade with reverence—

—Shhh...

"Huh?"

Suddenly, it felt as if the sword was growing lighter in his hands.

"Oh! Could this be—!"

A magic sword that amplifies the wielder's strength!?

It felt almost as if it weighed nothing!

'Let me swing this!'

The receptionist, delighted, raised the sword high.

Then—swoosh!

He slashed powerfully to the side.

"Huh?"

But the sword that had been in his hand only moments ago was gone.

"W-what!? Huh!? What is this!? Where'd it go!?"

He jumped to his feet, searching for the sword.

But all he saw was...

Black flecks, like ashes, floating through the air.

Ian had canceled the temporary projection as he moved toward the Main Residence.

"M-my 10,000 gold! My 10,000 gold, where did it go!!"

The receptionist ransacked the ticket booth like a parent whose child had been kidnapped.

He had already sold three tickets.

Since he'd sold them, it would be counted in the daily balance.

Nine gold per person, a total of twenty-seven gold.

Since he hadn't collected payment from the boy, his till was now short by exactly twenty-seven gold.

This kind of shortfall had to be covered by the receptionist himself.

In other words—

"Ah, no! Nooooo!!!! Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!"

Penny wise, pound foolish.

The sound of the receptionist's devastated scream echoed around the ticket booth for a long time.

It was the moment he lost more than a month's salary in an instant.

Idiot..

Chapter 100 : Going Home (2)

Going Home (2)

About an hour before Ian passed through the warp gate.

Right after Aris broke the barrier.

The moment she realized Ian and Kargon had been kidnapped, she immediately redirected the ship toward land.

'Damn it....'

Judging by the situation, it was clear the demon cultists had escaped through a portal.

If so, they likely hadn't gotten far.

Most likely, they were still within the territory of the Hisperion.

Trying to cross the border with a simple, makeshift portal—something easy to set up anywhere—would require an enormous amount of magic power, so much that even Aris would have trouble handling it.

If those villains really had that level of magic power, they wouldn't have just kidnapped Kargon and Ian.

The demon cultists never did things "halfway".

If something had even a little value, they'd snatch it up and sell it to their cult.

If they'd had the resources, they would have kidnapped Yuria and Charlotte as well.

But they only took Kargon and Ian.

'They didn't have enough strength to kidnap everyone.'

Or perhaps they came targeting Ian from the start.

If that was the case, it was the worst possible scenario.

If, after capturing Ian, they'd had any energy to spare, there's no way they would've left Yuria and Charlotte alone.

But they only seized Ian and Kargon before fleeing.

That was proof Ian fought so fiercely that he seriously depleted their strength.

But after such a rough and long battle, would Ian be all right?

Aris grew rather anxious.

If Ian truly was a dragon, and the demon cultists had made him their top priority, they would have prepared appropriate strength to deal with him.

There might have been several mid-rank master-level enemies among them.

'Ah...'

If Ian faced that kind of force alone, he might have been crippled...!

–Crunch!

Her teeth ground together as several ominous thoughts flashed through her mind, but ultimately, it was all speculation.

She needed to hear from the people who had actually seen what happened to Ian.

Aris asked the younger girls she'd rescued from the island, Yuria and Charlotte, everything they knew about Ian.

"I-I don't know! We were all together, but then suddenly he put us down and dashed off alone—then he just... disappeared! I think he was trying to save Kargon...!"

Charlotte babbled incoherently for a while, proving little help.

"Aris! Did you report to the Heavenly Sword Palace!? Can you at least tell us how things are going!? Are we really supposed to just sit here!? Aren't you tracking the portal!? Have you figured out where they took him!?"

Yuria, on the other hand, pressed her noisily.

'Haah... Worthless.'

Even so, after patiently questioning them one by one, Aris was able to get a rough sense of what had happened to Ian.

The younger girls said they owed their safety to Ian.

That Ian had protected them from the demon cultists.

Then, having stuck together for a while, he suddenly left them and dashed off on his own.

Ian must have sensed something at that moment.

That the cultists had activated a portal to escape.

'Then...'

Maybe Ian wasn't kidnapped after all....

He might have chased after them to rescue Kargon.

He jumped into their portal to pursue those carrying Kargon off.

'It's truly brave... Such a boyish thing to do...'

But it was too dangerous.

Ian's strength was still below early-stage Master.

Even if he really was a dragon, he would only be a hatchling at this stage.

If even a single late-stage master was among those demon cultists, Ian's life could not be guaranteed.

True, Ian had defeated a early-stage Master, Dellen, a few months ago, but back then there were variables like Flostilla, and now Ian was likely nearly unarmed.

If only she'd let him keep the swords he'd received at the Sword Selection Ceremony.

–Crunch...!

Aris bit her fingernail in frustration.

'And I need to report this situation to the Heavenly Sword Palace right away.'

Only then could they seal the borders and cities to prevent the cultists hiding somewhere in the country from escaping any farther.

The demon cultists had been thorough.

They'd smashed all the communicators that could be used to contact the Heavenly Sword Palace, so she hadn't been able to report the situation.

If Aris had been at her usual full strength, she would have run across the ocean herself to notify the Pavilion.

Even though the nearest city was about 200 km away, Aris, at full speed, could have reached it in under 10 minutes.

From there, she could take the warp gate to the Hisperion Main Hall and arrive at the Pavilion within 15 to 20 minutes at the latest.

'... Kh.'

But she'd used too much of her power to break the barrier.

She'd overdrawn enhanced energy atop the pitching ocean out of sheer force.

Although Aris had attained the peerless Grandmaster realm, she hadn't reached perfect mastery.

In such a state, she'd unleashed high-level powers that even consummate Grandmasters hesitate to use, so of course her body had paid the price.

Her mana circuits were torn, and her dantian overheated, so that raising even a little bit of aura now brought pain like thorns in her heart.

To fully recover, she would have to rest for at least a week.

'Haa... If only... If only I'd been a bit faster...'

Still, she regretted not pushing herself harder.

From what her sisters had told her, they'd missed Ian by a mere hair's breadth.

If she'd managed to break the barrier even just 10 seconds—no, 5 seconds—sooner...

She could have slaughtered the villains as they opened the portal and earned some points with Ian.

'Haaa... But what's the use of regrets now... I walked right into their trap like a fool.'

Aris swept her long hair back and massaged her forehead.

Having become strong enough to split mountains as a Grandmaster, perhaps she'd been overconfident in that strength.

To think she'd lose the boy she'd set her sights on right before her eyes.

She hadn't experienced such humiliation since breaking through to master-rank.

'I really need to reflect.'

Aris didn't make excuses and admitted her mistake.

It was true that she'd been too busy filling the huge vacancy left by the recently ousted Theo faction at the Heavenly Sword Palace, so she hadn't had the time or energy to pay close attention to this test...

Even so, it was a clear error to be so neglectful of matters concerning Ian, now the most important person around her.

This predicament was the price of that mistake.

'Never... I'll never make the same mistake again.'

A chilling cold appeared in Aris's eyes.

'I will never... give Ian to anyone.'

From a young age, Aris loathed having her things taken away by others.

Ian was a raw gem she didn't want to yield even to her own father, the Heavenly Sword Lord.

Ian had shown potential unlike any of the other talents Aris had recruited to this day.

How much effort had it taken to discover such a diamond in the rough?

She couldn't just stand by and let a demon cultist steal away someone so precious she wanted to keep him in her hands at all times.

She'd planned to nurture Ian, coax him, and take him as her closest confidant. To lose him so absurdly?

That was something Aris could never permit.

'I'll recover him. No matter what...!!'

A blizzard swept through her gaze.

'First, sealing the borders and cities is top priority.'

She needed to go to the Heavenly Sword Palace and meet her stepmother, Marceline Hisperion.

Marceline was the Palace Lord's second wife and currently acting as the Lord in his absence.

If Aris informed her that her biological son, Kargon, had been kidnapped, Marceline would immediately declare a nationwide lockdown.

Once the lockdown order was issued, inspections at all gates would be greatly strengthened, and artificial mana storms would rage at the borders.

With that, the demon cultists could not escape Hisperion's territory no matter what they tried.

Disguising their identities would be no help against the sharp inspections, and any attempt at stowing away or using other preprepared portals would be blocked by the mana storm.

'Still... there's a chance they've already crossed the border.'

It had already been over an hour since the cultists disappeared with Ian.

If they'd managed to set up a chain of portal devices all the way to the border, they could have exited the country long ago.

The cultists' portal devices required immense magic power to cross long distances in a single jump, but when used to make several short hops, the power required wasn't as great.

Of course, portals were precious artifacts even to the demon cultists, so unless they belonged to a truly powerful cult faction, the chances they had that many were low.

But it wasn't impossible.

'So I need to hurry to the Heavenly Tower as well.'

After meeting her stepmother at the Heavenly Sword Palace, she'd need to go straight to the Heavenly Tower to meet with the mages.

The mages of the Heavenly Tower could trace the portal's residual magic and track where the demon cultists and Ian had gone.

But if she brought just any mage, tracking the portal's path could take a long time.

To catch the demon cultists as quickly as possible, she'd need to bring either the Tower Master or Vice-Master.

Only then could she get Ian back before anything happened to him.

'Those slippery snakes of the Heavenly Tower are hard to budge even a little, but...'

Given the urgency, she was planning to bring them along by force if necessary.

'Every second counts.'

Residual demonic energy from the portal—the denser the residue, the easier the tracking.

She needed to bring those sly tower mages to the island while the traces were still strong.

"Lady Sword Dragon Master! Land in sight!"

Just as Aris finished finalizing her plans, an instructor shouted, pointing to the horizon.

Land was visible beyond the rolling waves.

"Good. This is urgent, so I'll head to the Heavenly Sword Palace first."

–Fwoosh!

Without hesitation, Aris hurled herself onto the sea.

Her body hadn't recovered at all, but this distance was easily manageable for her.

–Fwaaaa!!!

With a leap that sent the ship rocking beneath her, Aris's figure shot across the water like a catapult.

Attaining the realm of Walking on Equally Leveled Waters, where the sea became like level ground beneath her feet.

–Boom!!

Her mana circuits felt like they were about to snap apart, but gritting her teeth, Aris broke the sound barrier.

In the blink of an eye, she crossed the sea and leapt to the city, then immediately used the local warp gate to teleport to the Heavenly Sword Palace.

By repeating sprints and leaps, she soon arrived before her stepmother's office.

"Haa... Haa..."

Aris's breathing was a little rough.

She addressed the knight standing outside the office.

"I'm here to see my stepmother. It's urgent, so please hurry."

The knight bowed respectfully and replied.

"My apologies, lady Aris. Lady Marceline is not here."

At that, Aris's brows tightened.

"She's not? Where did she go?"

"She's at the palace infirmary. To see Young Master Kargon."

"... What?"

Aris, momentarily losing control of her expression, gaped.

"What did you just say?"

"...? She said she went to visit Young Master Kargon. Did I misspeak...?"

"No, no, it's not a slip of the tongue. Are you sure? She went to see Kargon?"

"Yes. Young Master Kargon, Lord Hisperion's sixth child."

"...?"

Aris cocked her head in confusion.

Kargon was in the infirmary now?

How...?

He was supposed to have been kidnapped alongside Ian.

Aris's eyes darted nervously.

"What on earth...?"

Then what about Ian...?

Ah.

Could it be that Ian...!?

No. No, this wasn't the time to make guesses.

Whatever the case, she needed to see her stepmother.

Aris hurried toward the infirmary.

And there—

"...!"

Aris confirmed Kargon was lying in a single-patient room.

"..."

Lady Marceline sat quietly at Kargon's side, gently fanning him.

–Creak...

Aris opened the door and entered.

"Stepmother."

"Aris. You're late."

Marceline turned her head to Aris.

Fiery red hair and golden eyes, just like Kargon.

One look explained exactly whom Kargon took after.

From head to toe she wore jewelry-encrusted garments, giving off a bewitching aura.

Marceline regarded Aris coldly and spoke.

"If this had been your scheme, I would've killed you on the spot. But judging by your state, it seems not."

Marceline, too, was a Grandmaster.

She instantly saw that Aris's energy pathways were badly damaged.

Though there was no blood connection between them, such words would be harsh in most families. But Aris paid it no mind and asked,

"Kargon was kidnapped by the demon cultists an hour ago. How is he here now?"

"Hmph."

Marceline snorted and turned away.

"That boy brought him back. It was interesting... Now I see why he's attracted such attention. And why you made yourself Sword Dragon Hall Mistress. You noticed his talent too, didn't you?"

"If you mean... that boy..."

Aris steadied her breath.

"Do you mean Ian?"

Marceline's cold eyes fixed on Aris.

"My son was kidnapped. While you, the Sword Dragon Hall Mistress, dithered and did nothing, that boy rescued him from the demon cultists with his own hands. Unlike someone who spins only dirty webs, he's a truly admirable and precious child. Don't you agree?"

There was a faint mocking and accusatory tone, but Aris ignored it.

Something else was more important.

"So Ian has returned as well?"

"You truly know nothing, do you?"

Contempt flashed in Marceline's eyes.

"You should leave. My son needs to rest in peace."

Aris had no intention of staying longer.

She needed to check if Ian had actually returned.

"Ah. Wait."

As Aris was about to leave the room, Marceline called out to her.

"... Yes?"

"You. Be sure to thank that boy."

Marceline's eyes burned nobly, like the sun, as she looked at Aris.

"If anything had happened to my son because that boy failed to save him... I would have killed you myself for your incompetence."

It was the truth, and also a warning never to make the same mistake again as Hall Mistress.

"..."

Aris met Marceline's gaze without expression and left the room silently.

She didn't care a bit for Marceline's warning.

"Ian...!"

Right now, the only thing in her mind was Ian.

My small gemstone, and perhaps my little dragon.

She needed to confirm that her precious secret treasure was safe, and she wanted to do it as soon as possible.