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Chapter 171

'Of all times, why did this have to happen when so many were listening?'

Once everyone had heard Revlin's words, the situation was spiraling out of control. Aishes' mind was busy, regret gnawing at him for having allowed Revlin to speak so freely.

'As if it weren't bad enough, we are in the midst of coordinating discreet alliances with other families before the trial. Things will get troublesome if the Diarca family hears about this.'

But if Revlin's words were true, that posed an even bigger problem.

'That...would mean war in a different sense.'

For Aishes himself, it didn't matter much who had killed Lenore, his loathed competitor. He was almost grateful that it could speed up his family's control over the situation. However, the family's perspective was different.

The Four Great Duke Families, having a shared history of opposing the Emperor for a long time to prevent his power from growing too strong, weren't as close as they used to be after the selection of the Crown Prince. Seeing the Diarca family becoming increasingly arrogant after their victory, the other three Duke families, including Apeto, began to feel uneasy.

It's commonplace for yesterday's ally to become today's enemy. The present was calm, but what about after Prince Katchian ascends to the throne? Was there any guarantee that the Diarca family would not attempt to break the wings of the other families?

Over the last few years, the Apeto family had been sending people to the East, where the Diarca family was strong, to gauge the atmosphere and recruit young nobles. This was also influenced by their heightened caution.

Aishes had seen Duke Apeto worry about the situation after Katchian's selection several times. If Duke Apeto had been present, he would have believed Revlin's words without questioning their authenticity.

A few incidents caused by the family being exposed during the trial and shaking things up were tolerable. Aishes hadn't interfered in this matter, so once he had dealt with his father and his faction and become the Duke, the problems could be quickly rectified.

However, if the one who killed Lenore wasn't the Emperor's side, but the Diarca family, the story changed. What he needed most before he could rectify the family he would inherit were alliances with other families that could protect him, and time. But what if the Diarca family, carrying the Crown Prince on their back, planned to attack the weakened Apeto family? Could they defend themselves?

There was only one conclusion in Aishes' mind, already considering the Apeto family as his own. If Revlin's words were true, the Apeto family could not easily overlook this situation.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Aishes failed to notice that his inner turmoil was plainly visible to Kishiar.

'As expected, he can't even consider the possibility that Prince Katchian might have acted alone in this matter.'

Had Prince Katchian already revealed his solo action and attempted to make contact, Aishes would undoubtedly have reacted differently. Fortunately, the Prince hadn't done so, and Kishiar had managed to take advantage of the situation and use the card he had just obtained.

All that remained was to witness the result.

"Very well. Then I must examine this letter myself."

Revlin handed over the letter just as Aishes finished his deliberation, as if expecting his response.

"You indeed should. Although the poison that soaked the letter has mostly dissipated, you should be careful, given your frail health."

At Revlin's words, Aishes flinched, and then hastily unfolded the letter. All eyes turned towards his fingertips. Onlookers in the back, eager for a glimpse of the letter Aishes was reading, lost all dignity as they strained for a better view.

And a moment later, Aishes Shand Apeto, having read both sides of the letter, opened his mouth so that all could hear, his face unnervingly expressionless.

"...It seems we cannot proceed with the planned funeral today. My apologies to those who have attended. We will contact you again from the family home in due course."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Has the Crown Prince truly...? Then what about the Diarca Dukedom...?"

Aishes ignored the exclamations from the temple staff and the curious questions from the nobles, and glanced at the body still lying open in the casket.

"Return this casket and transport it to the Apeto family home."

"You mean the Apeto family home, not the temple?"

"Yes. Understand that any further questioning would make your mouth and ears useless ornaments, which can be done without."

"Yes, yes! Understood."

The frightened workers and servants quickly closed the lid of the casket containing Lenore's body and formed a procession. Before handing back the letter, Aishes, who remained behind, shot a piercing glare at Revlin for quite a while.

"...You should have immediately contacted me or the family as soon as you received this letter, Revlin. Thanks to you, things will become much noisier."

"Why should I have done that?"

"Why should you? No matter where you've entrusted your body, ultimately you're a person of the Apeto family. Knowing the current situation of the family and still holding yourself there, don't you feel ashamed? You're certainly not becoming a real Cavalry member."

At Aishes's question, Revlin burst out laughing.

"Shame. Do you know, brother? This is the first time since my birth that we've had such a lengthy conversation."

"What of it."

Hearing Aishes' sharp response, Revlin looked around as if to show off. It hadn't been long since he'd left the Apeto family and entrusted himself to the Cavalry, but it was enough to understand the place.

During this time, Revlin had ventured outside freely for the first time and mingled with people while eating. He was taught to avoid eye contact with the rough and dirty commoners, but those he met were incredibly kind.

Even members like Devran, who had a hard time due to the Apeto family, were slightly gruff at first, but after knowing what Revlin had done, they softened and remained silent. It was a complete contrast to the family members who would beat their servants to death over the slightest indiscretion and thought it would be better if a child like Revlin died quickly.

Nion, his lover, had often said that compared to the Apeto family, this place was like heaven. Every time Revlin saw his relieved face, he was thankful many times over that his decision to send a messenger to Yuder that day was not wrong.

"I've never felt like I was a part of Apeto. But now, this place feels right. Even if I can't become an official Cavalry member, I have no intention of going back, so just assume I've died."

"What?"

Aishes was taken aback by his younger brother's statement. He didn't know what Duke Peletta had done to the child, but his mind seemed to be firmly set.

"Ha. I see. So, you liked being with those filthy commoners. If being called a traitor pleases you, I won't stop you."

"Thank you."

Aishes trembled at the corners of his eyes at Revlin's calm gratitude, but he quickly turned around. The person who stopped him as he was about to leave without even a proper farewell was Kishiar, who was smiling merrily.

"Well. I thought a conversation between brothers who haven't met in a while would be longer, are you already leaving?"

"...Thank you for your consideration, but I have a lot to do when I get back."

"What a pity. After receiving the message you sent a while ago, I was looking forward to meeting someone who could view the injustices happening within the family with such impartial eyes."

At Kishiar's insinuating gaze, Aishes unknowingly twitched his eyelids.

"That is... I don't think this is the place to discuss such matters under the current circumstances."

Aishes bit his lip slightly as he remembered the contents of the letter he had sent to Kishiar. Kishiar laughed and waved his hand.

"Oh, I see. I apologize. Nevertheless, I will not forget my gratitude for your clear judgment today, which allowed me to quickly get out of the unpleasant rumors I've been suffering from. Feel free to contact me again. I'm still greatly interested in what you sent me."

"..."

"Visiting the Cavalry and having a conversation might be good, too. You never know, right? Your heart might feel at ease like Revlin's and it could be beneficial for your health."

Upon hearing the word 'health', Aishes reacted visibly. Seeing this, Kishiar laughed with a casual expression. Aishes was an ambitious man who held the future of the Apeto family. However, even he, bold enough to contemplate toppling his father, seemed to find it difficult to maintain his composure in the face of his health weakness. After seeing the healthy glow of Revlin's face, one wonders if he knew how obsessively his gaze was burning.

If he hadn't seen it, he wouldn't know, but now that he had, he wouldn't be able to hold out for long.

"I... understand."

Watching the retreating back of Aishes, who was offering a semblance of a farewell, Kishiar felt that it was time for him to leave as well.

"Now, shall we also return? Everyone has worked hard."

"Not at all!"

"We're happy that you brought us along!"

The Cavalry members, led by Revlin, shouted in unison, their eyes shining brightly.

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After watching the Cavalry return to their carriages, Kishiar boarded another one he had stationed elsewhere. He was not heading for the Cavalry barracks, but rather towards the imperial palace. As the

carriage, enchanted to eliminate jostling, quietly journeyed, he tirelessly calculated the ramifications of the events he had set in motion that day and their potential outcomes.

Today, he had used Aishes Shand Apeto to sow seeds of suspicion and discord in various places. If those seeds took root properly, the sharp criticisms once hurled at Kishiar would now be directed squarely at the Crown Prince and the Diarca family, leading the Apeto family to lose complete trust in not just the Crown Prince but also the Diarcas.

He had also deliberately exploited Revlin to provoke Aishes's vulnerabilities, insinuating interest in a message he had previously sent. Even if Aishes' thoughts had momentarily shifted due to Lenore's death, in the end, he was bound to seek Kishiar again.

Capturing a closely-knit prey was challenging, but it was much easier to catch each prey one by one when they distrusted each other and scattered. Kishiar had no doubt that the seeds he had sown would soon sprout without harm.

'If I could also shake the relationship between the Duke of Diarca and the Crown Prince a bit more, I couldn't ask for more.'

Considering the Duke of Diarca's temperament, it was highly likely he was already attempting to strengthen his grip on the Crown Prince following these events. But would a young beast, having tasted the thrill of hunting for itself after enduring long patience, return obediently to its cage?

'That's unlikely.'

The relationship between the Duke of Diarca and Crown Prince Katchian, as seen through Kishiar's eyes, was more complex than it appeared on the surface and was tightly knitted, making it challenging to find an entry point. There were times when he wondered if he could ever create a rift between them, but now that Katchian had grown to be almost of age, an opportunity had finally come.

Kishiar lightly chuckled, regretting that he couldn't witness the Duke of Diarca's flabbergasted expression in person due to the sequence of events initiated by the Crown Prince.

"What in the world are we supposed to do about this, at the funeral of the Apeto, no less!"

On his return from his duty at the Imperial Knight, Kiolle halted in the corridor, hearing a voice echoing ominously. The voice originated from the stone exhibition hall, a place the Duke of Diarca usually kept off-limits even to his family members.

"Is Father in there now?"

"Yes, he is."

"Who is he talking with?"

"Baron Durmand. He arrived about an hour ago."

Baron Durmand was a distant relative of the Diarca family and one of the influential nobles from their faction. Kiolle had frequently encountered him since childhood. After the servants bowed and retreated, Kiolle furrowed his brow, watching the entrance of the exhibition hall intently. Although no voices could be heard from inside anymore, the brief exchange he had heard was troubling him.

'The funeral of the Apeto.'

Lenore Shand Apeto. Kiolle had heard about his funeral scheduled for that day. Although he didn't attend and therefore was unaware of what had transpired, it was clear from the Duke of Diarca's fury that something unusual must have happened.

'Could it possibly be related to... him again?'

An unusual event? Involuntarily, he remembered the black-haired Cavalry member he had met at the party the day Lenore died. On that day, Kiolle had secretly searched Lenore's body with that Cavalry member, and had even dared to confront the Duke of Peletta alone because of a vow to help him.

Fortunately, despite the spiteful prattle of his third brother, the Duke of Diarca was more concerned about the Crown Prince's impulsive behavior than the misdeeds of his youngest son. Thus, the matter had not been problematic and was eventually forgotten, but Kiolle still felt an uncomfortable lingering sensation.

He should have returned to his room and shut off his nerves. Despite the voice of reason pounding in his head, he found it hard to make his feet move.

"Huff. Hey. It's time to return. Summon my carriage and tell my attendant to come. Oh, and my throat is dry. Get me half a glass of Benug juice...."

At that moment, Baron Durmand, who was slowly walking out from inside the exhibit hall, was giving instructions to his servant. Then he turned his head and found Kiolle.

"Huh? Isn't that Kiolle? It's been a while."

"Baron Durmand."

When Kiolle called his name, a smile rose on the baron's aged face, which looked like an old rat.

"Oh, yes. Seeing you in your armor, did you just get back from your knight duties?"

"Yes."

"Excellent, truly excellent. You remind me of the Duke in his youth."

A typical noble offspring would have shown gratitude for the compliment, but Kiolle did not respond to such flattery. Instead, he wrinkled his nose and slightly turned his head towards the inside of the exhibit hall where Durmand had come out. He did not sense the Duke of Diarca inside. As always, when he was angry or feeling dizzy, it seemed he had gone deep inside to look at the magic stones he had collected for decades.

"I actually heard my father's voice as I was passing by just now. What happened?"

"Ah, about that...."

Baron Durmand, accustomed to Kiolle's cold demeanor, opened his mouth with a bitter smile, then sighed deeply.

"You know about Lenore Apeto's funeral today, right?"

"Yes."

"I had someone attend. The ceremony was not even held, and it ended up being a fiasco."

"A fiasco... you mean."

"It seems the Duke of Peletta and the third child of the Apeto family caused a major disturbance just before the coffin was brought in."

It was indeed related to the Duke of Peletta. Kiolle's eyebrows twitched as his ominous hunch seemed to be somewhat accurate.

"A major disturbance, what happened?"

Baron Durmand seemed to hesitate for a moment about how much he should tell, but soon he sighed and lowered his voice.

"The Duke of Peletta claimed that someone else was responsible for Lenore Apeto's death. He presented a new letter that the deceased had supposedly sent to his younger brother as evidence, and he even opened the coffin in front of everyone and showed new traces of poison that hadn't been discovered before. Truly astonishing."

"The fault of someone else means...."

"Who else would there be but the one in the Palace of Bright?"

It was a fact known to all of the Diarca family that the real murderer of Lenore was the Crown Prince. The Duke of Diarca was shocked and horrified by the Crown Prince's actions, which had taken place without consultation. However, if this incident could perfectly frame the Duke of Peletta, it wouldn't be a bad outcome. Thus, he had reluctantly decided to pretend he knew nothing about it.

However, today, all those plans had been utterly distorted. Baron Durmand, whose head ached merely at the thought of how much the many attendees of the funeral would chatter, clicked his tongue and firmly pressed the emerald jewel on his finger ring against his temple. He always wore such a ring due to his chronic migraine.

"We really got ourselves into a fine mess. I never imagined that they would have a second letter on their side. The Crown Prince was greatly surprised to hear the news too, but we're the ones left blindsided without doing anything."

"Did the Apeto believe the Duke of Peletta's claim?"

"If they hadn't believed, wouldn't they have proceeded with the funeral instead of halting it? They even moved the coffin containing the body from the temple to the Apeto main house."

"..."

"Hoo, I bet the Duke also has a lot on his mind. Why would the Crown Prince, who had been patiently doing well so far, suddenly step forward and cause such a ruckus?"

"My lord! The carriage has arrived. We've prepared everything as per your instructions."

"Ah, right. I'll be there soon."

Upon responding to the servant's voice that appeared just in time, Baron Durmand patted Kiolle's shoulder and delivered his last words.

"Nevertheless, there's no need to worry. The Duke always has an answer ready. Let's meet again next time."

With that, he hunched his shoulders, tightly grasping his luxurious ruby cane, and hurriedly disappeared. Kiolle watched the baron's retreating figure, as if he was running away, before moving his steps. He headed not toward the exhibition hall where the Duke of Diarca was, but toward his bedroom upstairs.

'The newly discovered traces of poison... they must be what that guy showed when he conjured up fire close to the body.'

The dark-haired Cavalry member had referred to the glow from Lenore's body as an unidentified poison. It was clear that he had informed the Duke of Peletta and orchestrated today's event.

'Damn it. The proof of the oath didn't disappear, so that guy didn't die that day. But why did I get so surprised and panic? I did something stupid. I feel like I've done something wrong to my father for no reason.'

He had tried to bury all the events of that day due to the shock and discomfort, but it shouldn't have been so. Kiolle felt an uncomfortable feeling as if he had betrayed his father and the Diarca family while the servants helped him remove his armor.

'That damned guy.'

His name was definitely Yuder Aile. He had boldly suggested that person come to the Diarca family, but the face that refused without a second thought still made his fist clench.

'I should have left him alone back then!'

Because of that cursed guy, Kiolle hadn't been able to vent his anger at his servants for months. Whenever he tried to curse, he would involuntarily feel drowsy due to the effects of the oath, startling him and causing him to back off.

When dealing with his subordinates or fellow knights, his discomfort grew as he remembered the nonsense that man spouted. Strangely enough, the more he distanced himself from others, the more friendly others became, which he didn't appreciate.

Unaware that this was because his reputation, which had hit rock bottom, was gradually rising among others, Kiolle gritted his teeth at Yuder.

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At the very moment that Kiolle was grinding his teeth, Yuder Aile was strolling through the imperial gardens behind the palace, feeling somewhat uneasy.

His body had fully recovered, just like before, after another day of rest. Even the slight fever that accompanied his heat period had completely subsided.

Still, Yuder couldn't leave the palace. He had been instructed to wait until Kishiar, who had left to attend Lenore's funeral, returned. Despite his regained health, he found it stifling to spend all his time in his room. Somehow perceiving his discomfort, an elderly servant suggested a walk through the garden.

"In this season, the imperial palace garden blooms with more flowers than at any other time of year. Even for us, who spend every day here, the sight is beautiful enough to stop us in our tracks. Touring the garden will help pass the time swiftly."

He appreciated the kindness, but the servant's insistence on following him in case he got lost seemed overly protective. No one, not even an imperial family member, would want a palace servant trailing behind him. After repeatedly promising not to wander too far off, he finally managed to shake him off.

'But that was not the only excessive thing.'

His breakfast that morning had been followed by a dessert tower on a three-tiered golden platter that filled him with astonishment. Even in his past life, when he had lived as a Cavalry Commander with countless lands and treasures, he had never seen such an extravagant dessert.

Recalling the tower he had painstakingly demolished over an hour, Yuder moved past the beautifully tended flower beds and stopped in front of an unfamiliar pond. A few fish, their fins fluttering like flower petals, swarmed towards him as if they mistook him for someone bringing food, but soon dispersed when he gave them nothing.

The scenery was beautifully serene, completely disconnected from all the happenings outside. Looking down at the flowers floating lazily and peacefully on the pond, Yuder was lost in thoughts that were entirely at odds with the peaceful surroundings.

'By now, Kishiar must be at Lenore's funeral.'

He couldn't help but feel regret for not being able to accompany him, merely imagining what might be happening there, and who might have been brought along. Kishiar would have shaken his head, admonishing him for not taking his advice to rest, but changing a lifetime of habits was a difficult task.

Walking past the pond and a little further, he saw vines spiraling around a beautifully carved pillar-shaped sculpture. Even atop the vine, a few yellow flowers had bloomed, suggesting that the servant's claim about flowers blooming everywhere in the palace during this season was no exaggeration.

In his previous life, despite frequenting the palace so often, he never knew when the flowers bloomed most abundantly or that there were sculptures and vines in these places. He reached out and briefly touched the pillar, the sensation noticeably duller. This was due to the new gloves Kishiar had delivered through the servants, which were made of a thicker material than before.

Yet, his heart felt considerably at ease, dressed as usual in his black uniform and black gloves. It was indeed fortunate that Kishiar had delivered the gloves and uniform before leaving.

"Only an empire would leave such artworks, coated with gold and silver just to highlight the flowers, exposed to the elements in the garden," he mused.

When Yuder was about to leave and move elsewhere, a stranger's voice unexpectedly rang out from behind. Turning his head, he found a man, whose arrival time he could not discern, leaning against a pillar with his arms crossed.

"Don't you think the same?"

Yuder's gaze was drawn to the man's long silver hair, shining like a honed blade. If a commoner were to tie their hair in such a long length, they would likely come off as weak. Yet, this man appeared neither frail nor soft. A refreshing smile brushed over his sharp face, reminiscent of a weapon tempered multiple times.

Only then did Yuder slowly open his mouth to respond.

"... I'm not sure."

"Really? I thought you felt the same, seeing the displeasure on your face as you touched it."

The man gradually approached.

"I've seen that black uniform recently. You're a member of the Cavalry, aren't you? Created by the Duke of Peletta."

"Yes."

"I am an envoy from the Kingdom of Nelarn."

The man introduced himself as such, but Yuder already knew his name.

'The second prince of Nelarn. Ejain Afnan Nelarn.'

A prince now, but a man who would surpass his brothers to become a king. And within a year, one of the most famous individuals in the entire continent, having become an Awakener.

In his previous life, Yuder had met him several times as an imperial envoy and as the sole Awakener striving to resolve a global crisis. Amidst the tumultuous times, there were few rulers who managed and led their nation and people as well as King Ejain. It was no exaggeration to say that Emperor Katchian, whose nerves sharpened due to the ever-weakening Empire, was wary of Nelarn swallowing him up, but at least until Yuder's death, that never happened.

But the reason Yuder remembered Ejain wasn't just because of that. For reasons unknown, Ejain seemed to like Yuder quite a bit, and he had proposed multiple times for Yuder to visit Nelarn. Despite Yuder's constant refusals, the last proposal from King Ejain arrived when Yuder was imprisoned.

'The Empire has abandoned you. Why can't you let them go? Come to Nelarn. The King says that Commander Yudrain is not the type to die like this.'

However, Yuder ultimately rejected that proposal too. That marked the end of their correspondence.

Ejain had also attended the party a few days ago where Lenore had died, so Yuder had seen him from a distance. Yuder was surprised to learn that he was here as an envoy from Nelarn at this time, but after that, he didn't pay any attention. He certainly didn't expect to meet him here.

"So, you came from Nelarn."

As Yuder responded slowly, as if hearing it for the first time, Ejain nodded.

"Yes. I was taking a walk just now. I wanted to personally experience the famed beauty of the Imperial Garden before the festival ended and I returned."

"You're walking without a single servant following you?"

"Well, the thing is, I got lost halfway. It's so vast that I ended up not knowing the way back as I kept walking."

His response was so cheerful that it didn't feel serious at all. Not knowing how to respond, Yuder kept his mouth shut and finally managed to cautiously ask a question.

"Shall I call a servant to guide you out?"

"No, it's okay. Rather, would you care to chat for a moment? I'm quite interested in what your Cavalry has accomplished during this festival."

In Ejain's eyes was an unfamiliar color Yuder had never seen in the empire. It was said that the Nelarn royal lineage was famous for inheriting eyes the color of lilac blossoms. A piece of information that Yuder had just barely memorized before his previous life as an emissary resurfaced in his mind.

"I don't know much about it..."

"You joke quite well. A Cavalry member who can wander around the palace alone can't be ignorant."

"..."

With a single word, Ejain pierced Yuder's defenses and then broke into a hearty laugh.

"You don't need to be so stiff. It's just a simple curiosity."

It seemed that he was not going to let Yuder go easily. The only way left was to finish the conversation quickly and get away.

"Understood... Please go ahead."

"Is it true that all of the over 300 members of your Cavalry are Awakeners?"

"Yes."

"Then you must be an Awakener too. What power do you possess? It's impossible to tell the power of an Awakener just by looking."

"I can... use a bit of elemental magic."

"Elemental magic! Even a little is quite impressive."

"It's not that impressive."

"Can you show it to me? I've never seen an Awakener's power in front of my eyes."

Yuder hesitated for a moment and then shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but that's difficult."

"That's too bad."

Fortunately, Ejain did not press any further. His demeanor was much lighter than Yuder remembered, yet he was as straightforward as ever. He continued to ask Yuder about various well-known rumors about the Awakener, eliciting answers and then bursting into laughter each time.

"Fascinating. You really don't have to pay any price when you use your power. It would be nice if I could have that kind of power."

"Didn't you just say that the perception of the Awakeners in Nelarn isn't good?"

In the Empire, where Kishiar and the Cavalry were based, many people also feared the Awakeners, let alone abroad. Knowing this, his words were surprising, despite knowing about the future where Ejain would truly become an Awakener.

"It's not. But would that stop me from wanting the power?"

Ejain laughed heartily as he responded.

"Having something is always better than not having it. The only ones who wouldn't agree are those who already have."

Though it seemed like a joke, it strangely sounded serious. As Yuder was trying to decipher the hidden meaning in his words, Ejain suddenly spoke as if he had remembered something.

"Ah, right. Have you seen that then?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The thing that turned you into an Awakener. The Red Stone that fell from the sky. I heard it fell somewhere in the middle of the Empire..."

Just then, from not too far away, the sound of someone running out of breath and shouting could be heard.

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Yuder was relieved that he didn't have to answer the awkward question. A youth wearing the traditional attire of the Nelarn Kingdom stopped in front of Ejain, panting heavily.

"Goodness! Do you know how long I've been looking for you? Where on earth are you going without a word...! Especially when such a significant event has just occurred, why do you always choose such times Prince...!"

"Melbon, Melbon. Can't you see the person next to me?"

"Eh?"

The young man, who had been about to pour out his words, finally noticed Yuder standing next to Ejain and quickly closed his mouth, surprised.

"My, my apologies."

"You never learn to pay attention to your surroundings when you're excited, no matter how many times you're told."

Ejain scratched his head while glancing at Yuder with a wry expression.

"Well, I wasn't intending to hide my identity, but I ended up having to. Although, since I am an envoy, I didn't lie."

Ejain grumbled, explaining that it was hard to have a casual conversation once his prince status was known, and looked at Yuder, who showed no particular reaction, in wonderment.

"But... aren't you surprised after learning who I am?"

"No, I was surprised."

"That doesn't look like a surprised face."

"I apologize, but this is my surprised face."

"Did you know who I was from the beginning?"

"Truly, I did not."

Ejain's pupils subtly narrowed as he looked at Yuder, who insisted calmly. His gaze was either amused or dispassionately observant.

"Um, Your Highness... We don't have time to delay..."

"Alright, I got it. I'm going, so stop nagging."

A young man, standing nervously by Ejain's side in the tense silence, spoke cautiously. Ejain, who had chided him lightly, turned towards Yuder.

"We've had the most enjoyable conversation since I arrived in the empire, and since it's all due to you, may I know your name?"

Yuder hesitated for a moment, but then replied.

"It's Yuder Aile."

"Yuder Aile."

Ejain repeated Yuder's name and wore a satisfied expression.

"I'll remember that. I hope we'll meet again soon so we can continue our unfinished discussion about the Awakeners."

Unfinished conversation, indeed. Would they ever meet again in this lifetime to continue such a talk? Even if Ejain were to become a King again, as in his previous life, it would be incredibly difficult to meet again as long as Yuder remained an ordinary Cavalry member.

Yuder watched the retreating figures of Prince Ejain and his party, who soon disappeared into the distance, then turned away.

He had intended just a brief stroll but meeting Ejain had caused a considerable delay. As he retraced his steps, trying to find a shortcut, Yuder started to wonder about the report the prince's subordinate was about to deliver.

'Has something happened in Nelarn? Or... was he about to report on an incident within the Empire?'

There was one thing he could guess about the Empire. It might be related to the fact that Kishiar and the Cavalry had gone to Lenore's funeral today. The thought made him eager to return and check.

"Where have you been? If you were any later, we were going to start searching for you."

The servant who welcomed the hurriedly returning Yuder sighed in relief and relayed the news that Kishiar had already arrived.

"I cannot imagine how worried the Duke must have been."

"Yes, I was quite worried. When I finished my tasks quickly and returned, there was no one waiting for me."

"Duke."

The servant, startled by the leisurely voice from behind, turned around with a start. Yuder courteously bowed his head in greeting toward Kishiar who had silently been leaning against the wall.

"I'm sorry, I lost track of time while out for a brief walk. I apologize for causing concern."

"Your well-being is more important than the worry you've caused. Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Only then did Kishiar remove himself from the wall and stride over. An immense energy that Yuder hadn't felt before his disappearance still enshrouded him, but unlike a few days prior, it didn't feel threatening. Kishiar too seemed to be sizing up Yuder, eventually nodding his head.

"Good. I can tell you're not lying."

"Then I can return to the Cavalry now?"

"Actually, even if you do go back, you'll have to rest for three more days. Are you so eager to return?"

"Yes."

At his firm response, Kishiar let out a small laugh.

"Alright then. You can go straight back."

After thanking the servant who had cared for Yuder over the past few days, Kishiar confidently strode toward the back of the palace. Upon boarding the waiting carriage, Yuder felt a weight lift off his shoulders, realizing he could finally return to the Cavalry.

As he watched the carriage leave the palace through the window, Yuder quickly asked the question he had been most curious about all day.

"Did you manage to successfully complete all the tasks you had today?"

"You would have found out soon enough. Were you that curious?"

"Yes."

"I'm more curious about what you saw during your long walk. Isn't that more interesting?"

His words sounded absurd, but Kishiar's smiling face did not waver. Yuder blinked for a moment, then cautiously replied.

"...Nothing much really."

"Same for me."

"Do I have to share?"

"Of course not, if you don't want to. Same goes for me."

It seemed like a joke, but Kishiar didn't appear to be backing down.

'Really, nothing happened...'

Was he suspecting that Yuder was hiding something? Suddenly that thought seemed plausible, and Yuder started to struggle to recall his day.

What did he see when he was out today? Nothing but flowers came to mind. Even that was becoming increasingly vague because, compared to the handsome man in front of him, the flowers seemed insignificant. After a moment of thought, Yuder awkwardly opened his mouth.

"I saw... flowers."

"Flowers?"

"Yes."

"Well, it is the blooming season. Anything else?"

"I saw some fish briefly."

"Fish... Oh, there was a pond nearby."

Kishiar, who had nodded, asked again, "Anything else?"

"While looking at a sculpture that resembled a pillar... I had a brief conversation with someone who was lost."

"Someone who was lost?"

"It was an envoy from Nelarn. Turned out, he was actually the Second Prince. We ended up having a long conversation because he was so curious about the Awakeners."

This answer seemed to surprise Kishiar, who then broke into laughter.

"Now that is indeed interesting."

"I didn't find it so."

What joy would there be in answering something you already know? Even during his conversation with Prince Ejain, the only thing occupying Yuder's mind was curiosity about what might have happened at Lenore's funeral where Kishiar had gone.

"I've told you all that I saw. Now, it's your turn to answer."

"What I did, it's just as you would expect. There were no surprising variables."

Only then did Kishiar leisurely open his mouth to speak. Yuder attentively listened to the events of the day as they flowed from his lips, exhaling deeply when he heard that Aishes Shand Apeto had disrupted the funeral.

'Impressive. The gap between the Apeto family, the Diarca family, and Crown Prince Katchian will surely widen due to this incident. The next trial should proceed more smoothly without any disruption.'

Although he achieved his goal simply and surely and returned, his extremely calm demeanor was because he was already considering his next targets without satisfaction. Who could guess his true intentions from his outwardly playful demeanor, where all these calculations were hidden?

Sensing that Yuder's mind had also become busy, Kishiar quietly spoke.

"Yuder. No matter how much you want to work, you can't for the next three days."

"...I understand."

"And when you return, don't go straight to your quarters. Make a stop at the medical division first."

"The medical division... you say?"

At these unexpected words, Yuder turned his head, and Kishiar's red eyes sparkled playfully.

"The bodies of the Awakeners are indeed different from ordinary people, so I've long felt the need to establish a dedicated medical division for research from the ground up. Originally, I was planning to set it up later, but I decided it would be better to start, even if imperfect, and gradually improve it, so I accelerated the plan."

In his previous life, there was no medical division until Kishiar retired. It could only be established when the number of members increased several folds and there were many Awakeners with healing abilities, and it took quite a long time to operate it properly due to the interference from those who were discontent with the Cavalry.

"We've secured beds in the empty space and brought in a doctor and pharmacist, even a priest. That's a good start, isn't it?"

When did he plan and manage to set up a medical division amidst all the busy work, let alone select a doctor and priest? It was hard to believe, but there was no way Kishiar would lie about such a thing, so it must be true.

"You'll be the first member to use the medical division. As a trial sample, I expect you to experience it with utmost sincerity and provide your feedback."

"...Understood."

He was flustered by the unbelievable fact that all these things were accomplished in just the day and a half he had spent unconscious from manifestation and the day he took to rest. Kishiar, stroking his chin and smiling, watched Yuder respond.

"But before that."

"Yes?"

"Now that you're fully recovered, shouldn't you heal the spot on the back of your hand? I can take care of that, let's finish it before we go back."

"Come, take off your glove." His voice, feigning solemnity yet carrying a hint of laughter, caused Yuder's fingertips to tremble.

Turning

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Why could it be? Although he had done this countless times, there seemed to be something different this time around.

As Yuder slowly pushed off the much thicker gloves than what he used to wear, he had the feeling as if he was undressing in front of Kishiar.

The gentle ambiance that had filled the carriage while they talked about walks and funerals had somehow dissipated. The moment his right glove dropped onto his lap from within his fixed gaze, the once taut atmosphere reached its peak.

Kishiar graciously extended his palm upwards. If not for the situation, his movement might have been mistaken as an invitation to dance. But in his other hand, he held a holy emblem and a white purification stone. Yuder glanced at the offered palm, then slowly placed his right hand on top.

That was the moment. When the two hands overlapped, an indescribable tingling sensation spread from his palm throughout his body. As Yuder's hand instinctively began to withdraw, long fingers clamped around it like a trap, stopping the movement.

“ ... ”

Yuder reflexively glanced at his captured right hand. Objectively, it was a cool temperature, but strangely it felt as hot as fire on his skin.

Manifestation had surely ended, yet why?

Could it be because their eyes, staring at each other, flickered red like blazing flames? Or...

Within the boiling silence, Kishiar slowly parted his well-formed lips.

"Are you afraid?"

"Pardon?"

"I asked if you tried to withdraw out of fear."

Again, and also this time.

He could, somehow, guess the words that were left unsaid.

"No, it's not that."

"Then why did you try to evade it this time? My assistance."

Yuder inhaled deeply, trying to ease the tension from his stiff right hand. As strength left his hand, Kishiar's clamping fingers opened like a sprung trap.

"I felt a strange sensation..."

"A strange sensation?"

Kishiar's gaze calmly studied Yuder's face. Yuder summoned some strength into his abdomen and murmured quietly,

"It's been a long time since I've been touched barehanded, that's probably why. Just... really that's all."

The gaze that seemed to pierce through his mind finally softened.

"A sensation... a sensation, you say."

With those words, Kishiar's eyes narrowed as they looked at Yuder's fingers, which had again slightly curled in response.

"Do you still feel it now? That sensation."

Yuder looked down at the large hand of Kishiar that held his. The shivering sensation had now disappeared, but the paradoxically cold yet hot warmth and the churning in his stomach remained.

"I...I'm not sure."

Bowing his head, Yuder added cautiously,

"It might... It seems like it."

"I see, so it might be related to the second gender manifestation."

Kishiar stared at their overlapped hands with a thoughtful expression, then added his other hand, which held the holy emblem, on top, completely enclosing Yuder's hand as if it was a shell. Cold sweat began to bead from his completely encased hand.

"And now?"

"No different."

Only then did Kishiar channel his divine power. White light erupted, and Yuder could feel a slight stinging sensation from his right hand. Before manifestation, even the slightest exertion caused tremendous pain, but now it was merely a tickle.

'So, it was indeed related somehow.'

Before Yuder could finish his thought, the light faded and Kishiar withdrew the hand he had placed atop. A faint smile surfaced on his face as he examined his now clean hand, save for a tiny purple dot.

"Were you in pain?"

"Yes."

"The stimulus you felt earlier?"

"It seems... okay now."

"That's a relief."

Kishiar lightly clenched his hand then let go completely. While a sense of relief washed over him, a chill akin to emptiness also set in, causing his shoulders to momentarily shudder.

"Yuder."

"Yes."

"It may seem strange to say it myself, but I do care about you quite a lot. You know that, right?"

"...Yes."

Although Kishiar's way of caring seemed somewhat dubious, he had silently supported Yuder in all his endeavors, provided physical healing, and even created a position of assistant by his side that couldn't have existed without trust. There was no denying it. At Yuder's small nod, a faint smile played on Kishiar's lips before disappearing again.

"When you manifested, I too experienced some sensations for the first time. It was quite unfamiliar and baffling. It was the first time I decided that I should refrain from deliberately approaching others."

At his words, Yuder's oddly transformed expression made Kishiar's eyes gleam with curiosity.

"I hope you won't misunderstand. It's natural to be drawn instinctively since we manifested as different genders, and it's also natural to feel unease and caution. Especially considering the uncontrollable impulses that might be inherent in that. But even so, nothing will change from before. If you wish to remain the same as you've always been."

"..."

"I will still treat you as my most cherished and beloved assistant."

Despite Yuder's lack of response, Kishiar didn't demand an answer and continued.

"So you understand? What I mean is...."

"I...I understand what you are trying to say."

Yuder interrupted him.

"Even though I have manifested my second gender, it doesn't mean I will suddenly be infatuated with those of the opposite gender and see the world turned upside down. Just, simply."

He looked down at his hand that still seemed to retain the warmth of Kishiar, and mumbled slowly.

"Like you said, because you and I manifested as different genders... it will take a while for us to adjust. That is really all there is to it."

"I see."

At last, a warm glow surfaced in Kishiar's eyes.

"To be honest, even if you weren't afraid of avoiding me, I wouldn't feel good about it."

Kishiar wasn't feeling good - a rare sentiment for him. Yuder was taken aback momentarily, then cautiously asked.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Perhaps this might also be a repercussion from your second gender manifestation."

Kishiar murmured, maintaining a silence as if contemplating something.

"I might have to revisit the parts of Beltrail's research records where he documented the interactions between Alpha and Omega Awakeners."

"Was there such a part?"

"Do you want me to sift through it and send it over when we get back?"

"Please."

When Yuder nodded, Kishiar smiled faintly.

"So, even in a situation like this, your inability to contain your curiosity... I rather like that aspect of you."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Of course it is. What could be a higher compliment than that?"

A playful expression finally surfaced on Kishiar's face after he said that.

"I've been lavishing you with praise, aren't you planning to return the favor? It's customary to do so."

"It's hard when you demand it out of nowhere, especially when I didn't ask for it."

"So, does that mean there's nothing commendable about me? I'm a bit shocked."

Despite knowing that wasn't what he meant, he made a show of acting aggrieved. Yuder put his glove back on his completely healed hand. Glancing outside the window, he noticed they were nearing the grounds of the Imperial Knights, where the Cavalry was stationed.

Kishiar, too, looked outside following Yuder and put the now dull purifying stone and the holy emblem back in his pouch. The faint sound of the carriage rumbling on the road filled the silence.

"... I think you're handsome."

Just when they were about to reach their destination, Yuder slowly voiced a thought. Kishiar's bewildered gaze seemed to prick his cheek, but he didn't meet his eyes.

"... What did you say?"

"I often think that you're very handsome."

"I know that but... Wait. Was that your answer to when I asked if there was nothing to compliment about me?"

Really? Was that really it? Kishiar, unable to believe it, questioned multiple times if there were no other compliments, but Yuder remained silent until the carriage stopped in front of their accommodations. Always the one flustered by Kishiar's words, seeing him flustered gave Yuder a certain sense of satisfaction, akin to revenge - a feeling he intended to keep a secret.

"We have arrived."

Before Kishiar could press further, the coachman disembarked from the carriage and courteously opened the door.

Due to the approaching dusk, there was not a soul passing by in front of the Cavalry. The two of them alighted from the carriage and entered the building.

"Follow the hallway on the first floor to the east, and you'll find the medical division. We've put up a sign, so it should be easy to find."

As if the previous talk of compliments never happened, Kishiar, bearing the demeanor of a Commander again, pointed towards the east and spoke. As Yuder nodded and passed by him, he stopped and turned to look at Kishiar.

"Do you have any more questions? Or if you want me to accompany you, just say it. I'm a Commander who has nothing to offer but good looks, but I can at least do that."

"Why would you say that? You have other merits as well."

"Oh? Like what?"

He was a man whom Yuder had always admired and followed since his previous life. If asked to list his merits, Yuder could honestly talk until dawn. However, he simply couldn't say all those things in front of the man himself.

Unable to voice his inner thoughts, Yuder swallowed and looked up at Kishiar's pale face.

"The fact that you are the only one who can command me, Commander."

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Chapter 176

As he spoke, staring directly into Kishiar's slightly mischievous-looking red eyes, Kishiar's expression momentarily changed. A laugh slipped out from the confusion reflected in his gaze, as if he wanted to say something but wasn't sure what.

"..."

"I will take my leave then."

As he bowed his head and turned away, no response came from Kishiar. But that was okay. His heart was significantly at ease.

"...Your Grace. Why aren't you coming up, just standing there since you've returned?"

"Ah, Nathan."

After being left behind, Kishiar called out the name of his adjutant who had appeared from the opposite corridor, a smile etched on his face.

"What should we do about this?"

"Pardon?"

"This is really troublesome. It's been a long time since I've been pricked like this."

"Do you mean you met an enemy on your way here?"

"I'm not sure if it was an enemy or not."

Frowning, Nathan Zuckerman observed his Lord as he muttered something that sounded like a riddle.

"I remember you were supposed to return with Sir Aile... did you send him on ahead?"

"Yes. As planned, I sent him to the medical division. He's on a mandatory vacation for three days."

Finally, a coherent response came from Kishiar. Yet, he soon burst into laughter again, shaking his head. Since he didn't seem upset, Nathan put his worries about his Lord aside and followed him upstairs.

After the party, it was known that Yuder Aile had been absent for a few days due to a secret mission assigned by Kishiar. However, he suddenly returned, greatly changed from before.

His colleagues, who had heard the news of Yuder's return, were first shocked to learn he was lying in a bed in the newly formed 'medical division' on the east side of the first floor. Then, they were utterly surprised by the news of his manifestation as an Omega.

"No way, after the party ended, I did think it was strange that some wall had blocked off an area on the first floor's east side. But, a medical division?"

Devran, who had come to visit the ailing Yuder, shook his head as he looked around at the neatly prepared beds in the surrounding area. Honestly, visiting the sick was an excuse; he was overwhelmingly fascinated by the newly formed area.

"Yuder, are you really okay? It was all over in just two days? There's nothing wrong with your body, right? You're really okay, right? I was laid up for a week, and honestly, my body still feels a bit sluggish..."

Standing beside him, Jimmy, on the contrary, couldn't stop worrying about Yuder, with an almost tearful look on his face. The boy, who had recently manifested as an Alpha, shared the pain he had experienced during his manifestation over that week, deeply empathizing with the sudden pain Yuder must have suffered.

"I'm fine. I'm just here to monitor my condition for three more days, just in case. Even if you're right next to me, I feel fine."

"That's right, Jimmy. I'm an Alpha too, and I'm here, but Yuder is fine."

Gakane, who had been quietly sitting next to them, intervened. He had been the most surprised at the news of Yuder's manifestation as an Omega, but among those who had come to visit, he had managed to regain his composure fastest. Behind him, his shadow clone was diligently peeling the skin off the fruit he had brought for Yuder. However, it was the Eldore siblings who were excited because Yuder didn't even eat a bite.

"Gakane! I like apples!"

"Gakane! Carve it into the shape of a rabbit for me!"

"Hmm... I haven't yet tried such delicate work. I'll practice more. Sorry."

"Gakane, practice more!"

"Even though you lost to us in the last duel!"

Yuder silently exhaled, watching the Eldore siblings nonchalantly stabbing a dagger into Gakane's chest. This tumultuous scene was not the last of its kind. Ever since his return, members constantly swarmed him, so much so that he couldn't remember the last time he had a proper rest.

Aside from those who had just arrived, there were so many visitors that he thought every single one of the 330 members would visit at least once. No, it seemed they already had.

"Ah. It's time for training again. We have to go."

Everyone hurriedly got up when Hinn, who had devoured all the fruit carved by Gakane's shadow clone, suddenly stood up and declared this.

"Already? Time flies."

"Yuder! We'll come again later."

"Yuder. See you later."

After everyone had rushed out, only a few chairs and a plate piled with fruit peels were left in a messy state. Yuder sighed again and the white curtain hanging next to his bed was pushed aside, revealing a face.

"Those noisy fellows, it seems better to ban them from entering or to feed them laxatives, doesn't it?"

"I agree in spirit, but we can't, Master Enon."

When the young priest called out from behind him, the guardian of Luma, Enon, scratched his scruffy head and clicked his tongue.

"The basic courtesy when visiting the sick is to be quiet. If they want to visit the medical division that much, they should become patients themselves."

"But that's why I said we can't....."

Yuder recalled the shock he felt when he first entered the medical division upon seeing their faces. He could hardly believe that the green-haired priest Lusan, who had helped him at the previous festival, and Enon were part of the medical staff in the Cavalry. While he could understand Lusan, he could never have imagined Enon here, which surprised him to the point of losing his words.

In response to Yuder's question about why he was here, Enon calmly replied that he had come to watch over him. It was even more surprising to find out that he had been selected purely by passing the interviews and tests conducted by the Knights of Peletta and Nathan Zuckerman. On the contrary, Lusan had been promoted to an official priest only a few days after the festival where he had helped Yuder and Revlin, as he had caught the eye of Kishiar.

Despite meeting for the first time, Lusan and Enon got along quite well. Lusan, who was an orphan and was rejected by the senior priest due to his blunt attitude despite his high divine power, quickly followed Enon, who, despite his rough manner of speaking, was surprisingly mature and competent.

When Enon mentioned that he had closed his pharmacy in the capital to come here, Lusan's admiration grew even more. From Yuder's perspective, it was fortunate that neither of them seemed the type to spread stories about the Cavalry elsewhere.

"Yuder. I'm here."

At that moment, Kanna entered the medical division with a bright smile. Yuder turned his gaze away from Enon, who nodded and stepped back.

"Did you come up from the underground?"

"No, I've been talking with 'them' alongside Ever."

When she said 'underground', she referred to Thais Yulman who was studying the Red Stone, and 'them' indicated Nahan's colleagues, the Awakened Brothers Gayle and Doyle from the Star of Nagran.

When Yuder could no longer continue the interrogation due to his symptoms, Kishiar and Kanna assigned the task to Ever instead. Ever, a strong-willed country girl, quickly formed a rapport with them and was said to have provided substantial help in a short amount of time.

"We've gleaned more information from their clothes, weapons, and today's conversation. They said they were feeling cooped up and wanted to go outside, so after consulting the Commander, I allowed them to walk around our property. They seemed pleased."

"Really?"

"Yes. I can't help but feel a bit sorry for them. They seem like people who wouldn't have ended up in such a situation if life hadn't been so hard."

Yuder thought that Nahan and the Star of Nagran might sneak in while everyone was away at the party to retrieve them. But nothing like that happened. Did the Star of Nagran intend to abandon Gayle and Doyle so easily? Although not as adept as Jimmy, they were still Awakeners with commendable sword skills. To dispose of them so readily raised doubts about the existence of camaraderie.

After assuming that Gayle and Doyle would not cause significant trouble even if left alone, Kanna summarized the additional information she had gathered.

"The headquarters of the group called the Star of Nagran seems to be scattered across two or three locations. It doesn't seem to exist only within the Empire... but the resistance is so strong that I still can't discern the exact locations. And the person referred to as 'that person' is definitely from the Empire, not a Southerner. An elder who seems to serve as a spiritual pillar for the moderates like Gayle and Doyle, so it seems they refer to him as a sage."

"A spiritual pillar..."

"Neither Gayle nor Doyle seem to know exactly what the objective is. But they continue to gather Awakeners, wanting to form a large group, so we can't just leave them be. Especially Nahan."

A look of concern appeared on Kanna's face.

"I've only glimpsed the information, but it's too dangerous. Just as Yuder was attacked without hesitation... Even though Nahan and the Sage are together now, if their conflict continues, it may not last long."

"Most likely."

"The Commander seems to be considering employing Gayle and Doyle as Alpha Awakeners, like those brought from Apeto Mansion, if they agree. It hasn't been asked yet, but hopefully, it will work out."

Kanna mentioned that Gayle and Doyle seemed to desire a peaceful and stable life more than internal strife. Those who handed them the swords, arguing that since they had combat abilities, they naturally needed to train, were Nahan and his Star of Nagran colleagues.

"But Yuder, did you know? Gayle and Doyle must have had a very strong impression of you. Even though they've only seen you twice, your name seems to conjure a terrifying and enormous image of a demon in their minds."

"...Me?"

"Yes. It made conversation easier, though. I told Ever as well, and she found it amusing."

Turning

Chapter 177

That he had become something like a big demon was beyond his imagination. However, seeing Kanna's joy, he thought it might not be so bad after all. She added a few more words about Gayle and Doyle before swiftly moving on to the next topic.

"Actually, this is the main point, but the conversation got a bit lengthy. Yuder, yesterday Yulman said he finished all the preparations. He stayed alone after the festival and experimented with the materials, which, surprisingly, seems to have gone exceptionally well."

The Elder Mage of the Pearl Tower, Thais Yulman, had been preparing to transfer the power of the Red Stone into another medium like a magic tool, then dissect the now-empty stone shell and its divided power. Given the preparation, which involved casting several layers of protection around the stone and procuring expensive materials from Kisiar, it seemed about time for a result.

"Really?"

"Yes. He said there would be no problem transferring the power as long as the preparations were properly done, and that he would proceed with the task tonight. The Commander will be attending, and I'll be going too. Yuder, can you... join us?"

"I will definitely go."

There was no reason to keep lying in bed, as his body was fully recovered. If it hadn't been for the Cavalry members who kept visiting, he would have already gone out to do something.

"That's a relief."

With a happy smile, Kanna told him about the progress of the special training she had been leading. There were many members who were thirsty for a method to further develop their power, not only Gakane and Kanna. Recently, there were always people at the training ground, even late into the night, who gathered voluntarily to train.

"Since everyone has different powers, just thinking together about how to train to become stronger feels helpful. I worry if we're doing it right, though..."

Yuder felt a warm sensation rising within him as he looked at Kanna's twinkling face. In his past life, he had never had these conversations with comrades, thus he had never felt this way before. He wondered if things would have been different if he had had the chance before. A twinge of regret crept in.

"Oh, did I talk too much? You must have been tired from dealing with the manifestation. I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

Yuder replied tersely, then added, worried that his response might have come off as cold.

"There's no better way to develop than to enjoy training. Thanks to your help during the party, I was able to finish the task much more easily. You're doing great, so don't worry."

"Do you really think so?"

Kanna's lips curled into a smile that reached her ears.

"I feel invigorated. Thank you, Yuder."

Looking at her now, he couldn't find the stony-faced girl who stood in line for the entrance exam a few months ago. Whether due to the increased sense of responsibility from managing the Cavalry or serving as Deputy, her eyes were now heavier, yet they radiated clear trust and warm friendship towards Yuder.

"Oh, right. If you have time, would you like to train with us? Everyone would be really happy if you could join, even if it's not as much as you helped Gakane and me."

"I'll do it."

"Really?"

Kanna looked surprised, her mouth agape at the certainty in Yuder's response.

"I already have the authority to modify the training schedule for the entire team from the Commander... and there are some things I wanted to teach."

"A training plan? Oh my! I can't wait. We have to tell the others!"

It was a bit doubtful whether they'd still look forward to it after the training changed to something hellish, but Kanna seemed resilient enough. Yuder watched as Kanna, excited, ran outside, promising to meet in the evening. He mentally added attending tonight's experiment to his schedule.

"It's time for your medicine. Take it."

Not long after Kanna left, Enon opened the curtain, offering a bowl with a grave face. Yuder sighed lightly as he stared at the ominously shimmering liquid, then he gulped it down.

"We've put in herbs good for energy replenishment, but the taste is truly terrible. How can you drink it so well without even a word of complaint? I thought Enon was making poison at first. Maybe it's because you two have known each other from the start?"

Lusan, who had been watching from afar, laughed with a fascinated expression. From a brief exchange between Yuder and Enon when Lusan first arrived in the medical division, Lusan guessed that they must have been close. Since they had indeed known each other before, Enon didn't bother correcting the misunderstanding.

"Stop chattering, kid. If you have time to watch, go do more tidying up. Have you finished what you were doing earlier?"

"Ah... No, I seem to have forgotten."

After Lusan hurriedly disappeared deeper into the medical division, Enon quietly looked down at Yuder. When he offered the bowl back, Enon abruptly spoke.

"It's strange."

"What is?"

"Before coming here, I thought all Awakeners would be like you. But after being here, I see that's not the case. No one is as outstanding as you, and no one else wavers as you do."

Waver? What? Yuder swallowed his questions and responded.

"What do you mean, I'm wavering?"

"Your energy."

Enon's eyes gleamed heavily, as if penetrating something.

"It's more stable than when I saw it before, but it's still... different somehow. You're hiding something, aren't you?"

He had already told Enon everything about returning from the future. What else could he be hiding? Yuder, puzzled, suddenly looked down at his gloved hand, and gasped quietly.

'Could he be referring to the spot? The spot has a strong effect on the body; maybe he sensed it that way.'

Enon might be able to discover something unknown by seeing the spot. Yuder had no intention of keeping it a secret from him, but their conversation was cut short when Lusan returned.

"Enon! Please come over here for a moment. I can't handle this alone!"

"..."

"I have a hunch... I'll tell you later, Enon. Thanks for the medicine."

"It's my job, isn't it? Just don't do anything reckless. I heard your conversation with that girl earlier, you're planning something tonight."

He heard the conversation with Kanna. Yuder hesitated over what to reply, decided to keep the Red Stone a secret for now, and opened his mouth.

"I'm not doing much. Just something to... investigate underground."

"Does it have something to do with the massive concentration of power there?"

Indeed, Enon was different from the rest. Yuder maintained his silence and then nodded.

"Yes."

"I've noticed a few mages around as well. I can't fathom what the leader of your unrecognizable lot is planning to do here. World domination, perhaps?"

It seemed that Enon had yet to have a face-to-face encounter with Kishiar. Curious about what judgment he would pass after seeing Kishiar, Yuder faintly curled the corner of his lips in a smile.

"I dare say it's quite the opposite, actually..."

"What?"

"Enon, quick!"

"He's calling you. Aren't you going?"

At Yuder's gesture following the urgent call from Lusan, Enon tightly sealed his thin lips and turned away. Almost simultaneously, the door flung open from the other side, and several Cavalry members exclaimed in surprise.

"Wow! This place is amazing!"

"Yuder! Yuder Aile is here, right? Where is he?"

It seemed like another round of non-visiting visits was about to start. Yuder closed his eyes and sighed.

"Yuder, you came quickly."

When evening came, and no one else was visiting him, Yuder put on his uniform over his casual clothes and stepped outside the medical division. At the central staircase leading down to the first basement level, Kanna, who was waiting for him, greeted him with a small smile.

"Let's go. Yulman, Alik, they're all waiting."

The basement, which he was visiting for the first time since before the party, resembled a legendary mage's cave, filled with even more magic circles and peculiar objects scattered around the Red Stone.

"Master Yulman! We're here."

"Oh! It's good to see familiar faces."

Thais Yulman, who was bustling around preparing something inside, approached the two of them. Yuder noticed that his normally neatly groomed beard was wildly unkept and smeared with an unidentifiable golden substance. His eyes, probably due to the impending grand experiment, gleamed with an almost manic fervor.

"I heard you were not feeling well, Yuder. You seem better now."

"Yes, I am fine now."

"Good. Missing such a historic experiment would have truly been a tragedy."

He led Kanna and Yuder closer to the Red Stone. As they passed through several magic circles, the previously unseen interior gradually became more distinct.

They saw the Red Stone and clusters of black gems neatly placed inside a box carved from a transparent magic stone. In the background, Thais's apprentice, Alik Pelgin, was stirring a pot filled with a liquid that shimmered like molten gold, muttering something under his breath with a grimace on his face. His eyes, blazing with a similar madness as his aged master's, and his face shadowed to the chin, gave him an almost spectral appearance.

Turning

Chapter 178

"Alik! Didn't your helpers arrive?"

"Ah... You both have come. I've been so busy, I didn't notice."

"Alik, are you feeling unwell? You look considerably paler than yesterday."

"Hehe... I'm fine. I just stayed up all night stirring the pot. I'm a bit exhausted, that's all. If I think that today's the end... I can handle it. Even though my body is burning with heat and my muscles feel like they're about to burst... I'm sorry for not offering you tea."

"No... it's okay."

"When I was young, I could do this for a whole week. No fuss."

While sticking out his tongue and shaking his head, Thais picked up a black gemstone laid out around the red stone.

"This is the best material made by mixing the heart of an ancient dragon, fairy dust, and a material called Sitanium. I guarantee it's the best vessel for containing the greatest power in existence."

"What's Sitanium?"

"Ah, you don't know? It's a synthetic material used when two vastly different materials need to be combined. It's often used to strengthen fragile magic stones. Originally, it was a cheap material used for making low-grade magical tools."

"How did you end up using that?"

At Yuder's question, the old mage chuckled awkwardly and averted his eyes.

"Well... you could say it's thanks to you, in a way."

"Excuse me?"

"That day, didn't you get a defensive magic tool bracelet from my disciple? While Alik was taking out an extra bracelet from his bag, he also brought out some Sitanium. It was the party day, and no one was around, so out of boredom, I thought, 'Why not put it in the pot?' So, I did."

Yuder was momentarily lost for words.

"...You just did that experiment with those expensive materials?"

"Hehe."

Thais Yulman, who had been evading his gaze and laughing, calmly continued.

"In fact, I had a bit of a concern. The heart of the ancient dragon and the fairy powder, when used separately, could withstand the power of the Red Stone, but not completely. But then, unexpectedly, Sitanium glued the two together and the resulting stone... It was unexpectedly magnificent."

In fact, Thais hadn't thought that Sitanium could fully blend two such powerful materials. However, the two materials, unexpectedly glued together by the Sitanium, had strangely melted and mixed together to form a black stone that looked like a gem.

When he brought the black stone close to the box where the Red Stone was, the ancient dragon's heart and the fairy powder, both naturally storing power, reacted gently at once, neither breaking nor resisting in front of the power of the Red Stone. It was an unexpected success.

"The power of the Red Stone is so strong that it seemed difficult with just one or two of these stones, so I kept making more and more since then. Now, Alik, when that fellow makes the last amount, it will be over. The process doesn't matter if the result is good. After all, all the great inventions in this world are achieved that way!"

Spitting out words fitting of a reckless mage, he explained that the material in the pot that Alik was stirring was still blending and emitting a gold light, but once it was finished, it would coagulate into black and harden like stone. That would signify the end of preparation.

"Master! The black color is beginning to show."

"Oh, the end is in sight. You mustn't let your guard down until the very end!"

"Yes..."

With Alik's dying voice, the sound of boiling emerged from the pot. Yuder watched Thais dart about, inspecting the magic circles and adjusting the ingredients, while pushing his apprentice aside. He spoke quietly to Kanna.

"Kanna."

"Hm?"

"Stay back a little. Your task will only be possible after the experiment is finished."

Kanna's mission was to read the information of the Red Stone, once the power within it was entirely separated and only the shell remained.

"Okay. What about you?"

Yuder fixed his gaze on the Red Stone in the layered magic circles, which was emitting a suppressed power.

"I need to prepare for if the power transfer process isn't smooth."

Just then, a new presence was felt from behind. As Kishiar La Orr, who brought Adjutant Nathan Zuckerman, revealed himself, all eyes were drawn to him.

"The Commander is here!"

"He has arrived. You have come at a very appropriate time."

As Kanna spoke in a contrasting tone and Thais, who had rushed out of the busy magic circles, greeted him, Kishiar blinked his eyes as if intrigued, looking around at the surrounding scenery.

"Please follow me. The final preparations will be completed soon. The procedure will proceed as previously mentioned. If you have any questions, please let me know."

"Understood. I'm looking forward to it."

Kishiar, who had entered through the formation, narrowed his eyes slightly as soon as he saw Yuder.

"You were here first."

"It's the task I decided to take on."

Yuder was focused on the flow of energy surrounding the Red Stone, ready to exert power at any moment. If even a little power leaked incorrectly from the Red Stone, someone might develop a purple spot just like that. He had informed Thais and Alik about the danger of the power of the Red Stone, and Kanna knew from before, but knowing about a danger did not mean it could be completely prevented.

"There might be danger, so I ask that you and Kanna stand back, Commander."

"If it's dangerous for me, it's the same for you."

"Even so, it is my duty to step forward at such times. Does not the warlord stand at the front when a battle is imminent?"

Yuder briefly explained, using the warlord in a strategy game as an example. However, upon hearing this, Kishiar threw a question about an unexpected aspect.

"I see. But have you ever learned the strategy game?"

"..."

Thinking about it, the strategy game, which absolutely required a game board and pieces, were hardly ever played by commoners who were busy making a living. Especially for a young man just turning twenty, it was more natural to focus on other things than such a game.

Yuder decided to answer shamelessly after a moment of silence.

'It's hardly ever played, not never.'

"I learned a little bit a long time ago."

It might seem strange for a man who lived alone for several years after living in the mountains with his grandfather to know such a high-class game, but what could be done about that? Nathan Zuckerman, who was standing behind Kishiar, gave him a very strange look, but Yuder responded with an impassive look.

"I didn't know that. You seem to know well, so let's play together next time."

"I'm afraid I may not be good enough to be your opponent, Commander."

"In that case, I'll teach you. I like teaching others anyway."

Indeed, it was even more so if the opponent was a smart student. Kishiar, chuckling softly to himself, seemed to enjoy the situation rather than harbor any doubts, much like his subordinates. Seeing this, Yuder was reminded of his past life.

It was Kishiar who first taught Yuder, who knew nothing, the art of the strategy game. When Yuder asked why he needed to know about the strategy game while working as a Commander, Kishiar had said that to understand and appropriately respond to the metaphors nobles often made about the strategy game, he needed to learn them without question.

There were other essential skills for nobles that Kishiar taught Yuder before he retired, but the moment felt strangely surreal, perhaps because Yuder had recently dreamed of Kishiar talking about the strategy game.

"..."

"We're done!"

At that moment, Alik loudly announced that all preparations were complete. Yuder watched as Alik broke a hard, black mass inside the pot into pieces the size of his palm and stepped forward.

"Let me help you."

"Thank you. Please place it next to the Red Stone. Even though I've made it this far, I'm a little afraid to get close to that stone. Haha."

Alik whispered, handing the black mass to Yuder.

"Place them here, here."

Thais Yulman, brimming with excitement, poured the black stones that Yuder brought into a large basket along with the stones he had made so far.

"We finally start now! Ah, I feel like my blood is boiling. Yuder, have you ever seen a magic tool being made?"

"I have only seen the completed tools, never the process of making one."

"That's true for everyone."

Thais, letting out a hearty laugh, stepped back a little from the magic circle and took his position.

"The method is simpler than you think. Starting now, my apprentice and I, and one Awakener, will work together. While the Awakener ensures that the power of the revealed Red Stone does not leak out from the box, we will gradually channel that power into the stone using magic."

"Is it possible to do it with magic alone?"

"Why else would we have drawn so many arrays? The tools placed around us aren't there for no reason. According to the formula, a unit of magic power capable of summoning a fire...."

After murmuring something incomprehensible, Thais commented on how tough it had been before getting back on topic.

"So, in theory, it is possible! The concern is that something unexpected may happen if the power leaks from the stone."

"In that case, leave the task of uncovering the box to me."

"Of course, that was the plan. Kanna praised you several times for being the most skilled Awakener in the Cavalry. If I can't trust you, who can I trust?"

Yuder quietly turned his gaze toward Kanna. Noticing Yuder's gaze, she looked back at him with an apprehensive look, her face full of questions.

"I will do my best."

"You should. You're far more ambitious than my timid apprentice. Haha."

"What did you say, Master?"

"Nothing. Stand beside me, no, a step forward. Yes, there, Alik."

Yuder took a deep breath and looked at the box containing the Red Stone.

Turning

Chapter 179

Yuder took a deep breath and examined the box containing the Red Stone. As he stood directly in front of it, focusing his mind, he felt a force surging like a beast chained up.

'So many magic circles to suppress it, yet... it's not to be taken lightly.'

He clenched and unclenched his gloved hands, pressing them against the sides of the transparent box. A palpable tension filled the large basement. Before unsealing the box, Yuder glanced over to find Kishiar.

He was standing protectively in front of Kanna and Nathan, watching over Yuder. At a glance, his casual posture, arms folded, seemed overly relaxed. But the tight, strung energy he carried hinted at his unwavering alertness.

Just as Yuder decided that was enough, their eyes met briefly.

"Yuder Aile."

"Yes."

"If you sense any danger, retreat immediately."

"Understood."

As he responded, Yuder prepared himself to use his strength and slowly peeled the top off the transparent box.

"...Hmm. How is it?"

"It's fine."

Thais Yulman, who had cautiously asked the question, wiped the sweat from his forehead with a relieved expression at Yuder's answer.

"Good, good. We've gone to great lengths to create the formation, it's only right! Now all that's left is to add things in order, Alik!"

"Yes, Master."

"Activate the next formation. Prepare yourself."

Even though the strongest barrier that had been blocking external forces was gone, the pressure emanating from the Red Stone was clearly not as strong as before. Yuder, keeping his gaze on the revealed Red Stone, took a step back.

Thais Yulman moved a bit closer to the stone and began to recite an incantation carefully. His voice was so low that the content was impossible to discern. Soon after, his apprentice Alik joined him, their voices with a strange resonance echoing, causing a wave of dizziness.

As their resonance grew stronger, at some point, blue light flowing from under the mages' feet began to transfer to the drawn magic circles that were just white. The spectacle of dozens of lines forming the magic circles across the entire basement interweaving like flames was truly magnificent.

"Wow...!"

From afar, Kanna's exclamation was heard. Yuder also couldn't take his eyes off the sight, as it was his first time seeing such a large-scale formation in motion.

Finally, all the lines forming the circles connected into one light, twinkling beautifully like hundreds, thousands of falling stars in the night sky. The table where the Red Stone lay was enveloped by a vivid white light bursting up from the central circle beneath it.

Kuuuu. A powerful gust of wind hit them, along with a sensation of the air being torn apart, though no sound was heard. Yuder, panting heavily, strained his eyes to not miss any changes in the Red Stone trapped in the white light.

The white light from the magic circles and the rough energy from the Red Stone clashed and coiled around each other, each trying to overpower the other. Sweat dripped from Thais Yulman and Alik's foreheads, possibly due to the powerful energy of the Red Stone that refused to yield easily, even suppressed by so many circles.

"Alik!"

"Yes!"

When Alik responded to his master's summons and waved his hand, the inexplicable tools that had been resting on the few formations began to glow in different colors. As if receiving the power of the white light that flowed from the magic circle, the intensity of the light grew stronger, grasping the energy of the Red Stone in a tangled state and laboriously pulling it upwards.

"Success!"

The energy of the Red Stone, which until a moment ago had been barely visible compared to the white light, turned bright red and came into everyone's sight.

"Prepare the medium, quickly!"

As Thais Yulman reached out his sweaty hand, Alik picked up a black stone that had been abundantly filled in a basket and handed it to his master.

"Come in, quickly!"

The old mage holding the black stone shouted like a madman and raised his hand abruptly. In response to his call, the white light, which had ensnared the red energy, began to scatter in every direction, splitting into very small beams of light with a roar-like vibration. Thais Yulman pointed with his finger at one of those light beams, which seemed to be at least dozens in number.

From the tip of his finger flowed a tiny magic power that made the light halt, and as he slowly pulled it, the black stone began to react to the approaching power. Finally, the red energy that touched the surface of the stone writhed and twirled around like water being sucked between gaps, and then swiftly disappeared.

"Hmm..."

Thais Yulman, who had been clenching his teeth, looked down at the black stone, which had turned red by sucking in the red light, and his eyes filled with momentary emotion. But that emotion was quickly put away, and only a cool judgment filled its place.

"Good. It seems to be going as planned. But don't let your guard down. Alik, can you handle it?"

"Yes."

Alik answered strenuously with a weary face.

"Keep your mind clear. We have to do the same thing dozens of times from now on."

Afterwards, the two mages methodically repeated the process of sucking the red light into the black stone, which they had practiced countless times, and placing it back into the empty basket. As the once seemingly massive red energy began to decrease gradually like a leaf slowly being chewed up, the oppressive atmosphere that filled the basement began to shift.

The dizziness pressing down on his head began to fade, but as the red energy disappeared, the white light flowing from the magic circle became stronger, giving the feeling that the flow of air was becoming more unstable.

'When Thais Yulman said it would be more dangerous after the energy in the Red Stone is gone, he must have anticipated this.'

Yuder furrowed his brow and exhaled deeply. So far, the energy flowing from the Red Stone was tightly held by the white light and not leaking elsewhere, but he could not let his guard down for a second.

"Alik! Open your eyes. You nearly dropped the stone!"

"I'm...sorry, Master."

Alik Pelgin, who had been busily controlling the white light inside the magic circle with his master and passing the black stones, slowed significantly when the black stone was about halfway dropped. Even though Thais urged him with a desperate face, he could not fully open his eyes, which were slowly closing.

"Alik."

"Ugh... Master. The force is becoming stronger than expected..... Even if we buy more time, can we not bypass the controlling formation for a moment...? If it continues like this... I really might make a mistake."

"To bypass it... Even if we delay, the amount we have to endure is the same! There's no good in it for the body!"

"But... I really can't stand it. It's becoming too hard..."

"Didn't I tell you to get some sleep yesterday, you fool? Normally, you'd be able to handle this much!"

"But still..."

Alik, mid-sentence, suddenly clenched his teeth and his hands began to shake.

"Argh, ugh!"

As he seemed to pull away from the white light, now glowing red, he let out a scream and fell backwards.

"Aaargh!"

The accident happened in an instant. As Alik fell, he knocked over a basket filled with black stones. The stones that were left spilled over onto the floor, scattering in all directions.

"No!"

The two energies that were barely maintaining their balance suddenly destabilized and began to shatter and unravel. The red light, which was still half full, began to roar as if it had been released from its chains, spreading throughout the entire basement. Thais Yulman cursed and swung his hand in frustration.

"Damn it!"

He desperately tried to control the energy, but it was not enough on his own. Just as Alik lost consciousness, his eyes rolling back, Yuder used his power, lifting both his hands.

'Barrier.'

A harsh wind that could strip flesh split into multiple strands, joining with the pouring water from the ceiling to form a protective shell around everyone. At the same time, the vast room seemed to constrict as the expanding energies suddenly intensified, producing a blinding light.

'...This...'

This was not going to end with just two energies intertwining and shattering. An explosion was imminent. Yuder could instinctively feel the danger, his skin trembling with fear.

Not even the potent force that could move nature could prevent this explosion. So, what could? What should he do?

At that moment, he felt a different sensation on the back of his right hand, as if it was responding to his desperate will. From within the blistering heat, like sticking his hand in fire, a red light identical to the power filling the room flowed out piercing through his glove.

Yuder panted heavily, alternating his gaze between the light emanating from his hand and the red energy of the stones filling the room. He didn't know what this was, but he strangely felt that if he used this power now, he could somehow connect with that red energy.

Without fully understanding the nature of this strange conviction, Yuder grasped it tightly and swung his hand.

With a pain as if striking a heavy, solid wall, the red light swirled with a roar. His fingertips, palms, arms, shoulders, and eventually his entire body trembled as if it would burst, and his consciousness began to drift...

When he opened his eyes again, he was still standing in the basement.

Swallowing the dizzying sensation and raising his head, Yuder saw the unbelievable sight of the two energies that were about to explode frozen as if time had stopped. Everyone within the barrier of water and wind that Yuder had summoned was looking at him.

Kanna, huddled in fear, had a look of pure amazement on her face. Nathan Zuckerman, standing in front of her as if to protect her, held his sword drawn, and in his eyes was a rare look of surprise. Alik Pelgin, unconscious on the floor, gave no response, but the shock on Thais Yulman's face, who was slumped beside him, was palpably intense.

Turning

Chapter 180

Yuder observed as the elderly mage who had been watching him turned his head slowly, looking up at someone in greater surprise than before. That someone was none other than Kishiar La Orr. The savage movement that had been pulsating wildly under the feet of the man who now stood atop the magic circle, in place of the unconscious Alik, had completely calmed. A white light flickered, shimmering brilliantly.

"That was a close one."

Ignoring the gaze of Thais Yulman, Kishiar opened his mouth toward Yuder.

"I don't know what it is... but it appears that you've seized the power of the Red Stone. Is that right?"

Yuder only then realized that a red light was still streaming from his clenched right hand. As he slowly uncurled his fist, the light that had been flowing between his glove and sleeve faded away. The red energy, which had been frozen like ice, started to spin very slowly once again.

"It seems... so. Have you controlled the energy, Commander?"

"Yes."

Fortunately, by managing things one at a time, they seemed to have averted an explosion. Sighing in relief, he turned to Thais Yulman, as the elderly mage struggled to open his mouth, his face a wreck.

"Wasn't it that His Grace the Duke of Peletta only possessed the power of the Awakener? This energy, unless you're a mage, is impossible to control alone. How could this... Moreover, that thing..."

He couldn't manage to finish his sentence, and simply gazed at Yuder when referring to 'that thing.' His expression revealed that he couldn't find the words to express his thoughts.

"Thais Yulman."

Kishiar called him calmly.

"There's a lot I could say about your neglect of your disciple's condition in your haste and ambition to expedite your research, but there's a more pressing matter at hand. I'm not bearing this easily, either, so I'd appreciate it if you could get up and finish things as quickly as possible."

"Ah..."

"Or are you going to give up just like that?"

Thais Yulman's dirty beard quivered. He managed to push himself up, panting heavily.

"...No, I'm not."

With only Kishiar controlling the energy, things had sped up incomparably to before. The fact that the red energy, once caught in Yuder's hand, had become astonishingly calm, was also a factor.

Yuder wiped the cold sweat trickling down his chin with his sleeve as he watched Thais Yulman, his face stricken with shock, quietly finishing the final steps. The indescribable sensation of gripping and moving that red energy in his hand was still vivid.

What on earth had that been?

Finally, Thais Yulman had succeeded in sealing the power of the Red Stone in the last remaining black stone. Watching him, Kishiar withdrew his foot from the magic circle and stepped back a few paces. The brilliantly controlled white light began to slowly fade, and the glow from the magic circles filling the space dimmed as well.

His face was as tranquil as before, but his cheeks were pale, devoid of color. It wasn't until then that Yuder was certain that Kishiar hadn't been holding up as easily as he'd claimed.

All that was left after the light had faded was a silence that felt as deep as being underwater.

"Yuder. Don't let down the barrier yet."

Kishiar began to issue orders, looking around.

"Nathan. Move the unconscious one to the back and guard the basket with the catalyst in it. And Kanna."

"Yes."

Without being told, it was now your turn, Kanna stepped forward with a resolute expression on her face. Yuder looked down at the Red Stone quietly placed in front of him. The stone now seemed devoid of any power, but he couldn't be certain.

"Captain, please wait a moment. May I touch it before Kanna does? Instead of direct contact, I'll try it lightly with my power."

If the answer had been negative, he would have tried to touch it with his hand first, but fortunately, Kishiar only frowned briefly and nodded.

"Go ahead."

Yuder, in front of everyone, pumped more power into his protective barrier and summoned a gentle breeze, which he sent toward the Red Stone.

"..."

Kanna flinched, perhaps the memory of the Red Stone emitting a powerful force the moment an Awakener's power touched it was still vivid in her mind. However, the Red Stone now seemed like an ordinary rock, quietly accepting the breeze. It was the same when water was dropped on it.

Yuder slowly counted to ten internally, and after confirming there was really no change, he finally relaxed his shoulders.

"I have confirmed it. It seems that the power and the stone are completely separated."

"Hoo."

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, Kanna exhaled.

"Then it's my turn. Can you withdraw this wall in front of me?"

Yuder withdrew the water and left the wind. Kanna, feeling the wind tickling her forehead, let out a faint sigh of relief and took a deep breath in front of the palm-sized stone.

Yuder watched as she slowly touched the stone with her fingertips, which were glowing like a mirage. The moment her skin made full contact with the stone, Kanna, who had been closing her eyes, shuddered violently as if struck by lightning.

"Kanna?"

"..."

"Kanna Wand."

Kishiar cautiously called her name, but there was no reply.

And after a moment, Kanna's body stiffened like a log and fell backwards.

"Kanna!"

Yuder managed to prevent her head from hitting the ground using the wind, but Kanna, who had fainted, didn't regain consciousness.

'What the hell is this.'

Yuder hastily removed all the protective barriers and rushed to Kanna, checking her condition. Thankfully, she was breathing normally. Following him swiftly, Kishiar knelt on one knee and twisted the Red Stone out of Kanna's hand. The movement was so natural that Yuder failed to stop him.

"Commander!"

"It's okay."

Despite Yuder's late exclamation, unlike Kanna, Kishiar didn't faint. He carefully rolled the stone in his hand, a chilling question crossing his face.

"I don't feel anything. It would be better to think that the reason she fainted has something to do with the use of her power."

"..."

"First, move the two who fainted to the medical division, and the rest should go and get checked out as well. Leave the basket with the medium in my office, we'll look at it again tomorrow."

Yuder, with a weary expression, glanced at Thais Yulman sprawled on the floor and nodded.

"...Understood. I'll help."

"No need."

However, Kishiar's response was absolutely firm.

"We can't have the person who needs to go to the medical division first doing such a task. Can I check your condition before you go?"

"Excuse me?"

Before he could respond, Kishiar had come closer, unbuttoning Yuder's uniform jacket and swiftly pushing aside the shirt underneath to expose his shoulder. Yuder was inwardly surprised that he hadn't noticed an opportunity for such an intrusion, even as he was watching. An unfamiliar expression briefly passed over Kishiar's face.

"...Fortunately, it doesn't seem as severe as I had anticipated."

The exposed shoulder was maintaining its clean, original skin color. Yuder realized that Kishiar was recalling and checking for the spot enlargement that had appeared up to his shoulder during his previous visit to the East.

"Did you really need to check this immediately?"

"After witnessing that spectacle earlier, how could I not?"

As Kishiar responded curtly and paused, he took a long breath, closing and then reopening his eyes.

"Any pain?"

"None."

"Answer accurately."

"I truly feel nothing."

Ever since he thought he might touch the power of the Red Stone, there had been no pain, not even during the continual usage of his power. It was still the same. Even as he continued to provide protective barriers for several people, it felt as smooth as before the spot appeared... or perhaps even smoother.

What really had happened? Yuder, recalling a sensation that he had yet to fully comprehend, looked up at Kishiar. Kishiar, too, was looking down at his face.

"We can discuss how you were able to suppress the power of the Red Stone later."

It seemed he was thinking along the same lines as Yuder.

"For now, go to the medical division. Request treatment from Priest Lusan immediately."

"Understood."

"Nathan, take them to the medical division. I'll take care of things here, so move right away."

"Understood."

The loyal adjutant did not question Kishiar's orders this time either.

With the help of Nathan Zuckerman, who was carrying two unconscious people on his arms, Yuder, supporting a pale and speechless Thais Yulman, left the basement. As they left, Kishiar's impassive face disappeared behind the door.

"What on earth is all this?"

After examining the faces of the newcomers, Enon couldn't hide his shock.

"A building shaking all of a sudden, and a horde of patients, some of whom I've never seen before, and others who left this place, are coming in. What on earth did you do?"

"..."

Yuder, letting Enon's whispering question in his ear slide, turned his gaze toward Kanna lying on the adjacent bed. Looking at her still pale, seemingly asleep face made his heart heavy.

"Are you listening? What exactly did you do?"

"The Red Stone."

Enon bit his lip at Yuder's low answer.

"It's because of that."