

Turning 241

Chapter 241

"...Therefore, it is highly likely that the route Prince Ejain suggested would be difficult to take."

"To what extent is it..."

"Ah, just in time."

Kishiar extended his hand to Yuder.

"This map shows the monster occurrence in the border areas, as reported by the Peletta Knight who has been stationed in the West."

Receiving the map from Yuder, Kishiar spread it out on the table. Everyone could see the red area and scattered dots marked on the map.

"Do you recognize what the map represents?"

"Yes. It captures the bordering regions of the nations connected around the Great Sarain Forest."

"Correct. Up to here is the western part of the Empire, this is Durban, next to it is Nelarn, below it is Aeryl, and finally Hisnu."

At Ejain's words, Kishiar, nodding his head, mentioned each country adjacent to the Great Sarain Forest.

"Normally, around this time of year, we would have only seen a slight monster occurrence at the northwest end of the Great Sarain Forest, outside the western imperial border. It wasn't until about two months had passed that we would see a significant rise in monster sightings within the border. But this time, the occurrence is much earlier than anticipated."

His long finger swiftly traced over the marked red areas.

"There have already been several monster sightings near the fastest route to Nelarn. If they continue at this pace, the road will soon be blocked, and the monsters may completely overrun the western imperial border, making it impossible to reach that far."

"..."

Ejain's expression grew serious.

"I had heard of the numerous monster occurrences near Nelarn's border. The anticipated damage seemed significant... But to see them distributed evenly deep within the forest, this is the first time. Is this information confirmed?"

"The Peletta Knight has spent years eliminating monsters and gathering information throughout the Empire. We are confident that we are second to none in terms of relevant information. This map is a compilation of encounters with merchants, the Peletta Knight, and local residents who passed through the area."

"...This is quite troublesome."

Ejain rubbed under his chin and sighed.

"Why must such a thing happen at a time like this..."

"If possible, I would suggest you take a detour around the Great Sarain Forest, but that may be difficult."

"...I suspect it would be."

Ejain furrowed his brow in response.

"I have informed His Majesty, the Emperor, but the reason I insist on passing through that dangerous area is that I have received news of the deteriorating health of the King of Nelarn due to his chronic illness."

The King's worsening chronic illness. Its implication was simple.

From the moment the King's seat is vacant, the fight for the throne, which had been brewing under the surface, would openly erupt.

Ejain nodded heavily, as if affirming the thought that crossed everyone's mind.

"Although the King promised to bequeath the throne to me, the opposition is so fierce that he has not been able to fulfill his intention. Thus, I intended to consolidate my position with the approval of His Majesty, the Emperor of Orr, on this visit... If I achieved my goal, but there is no position left to return to, everything will become impossible."

Inside the Nelarn's homeland, there was no one on Ejain's side. His four brothers had allied to ostracize Ejain, who had demonstrated the most exceptional abilities, and the external assistance was too feeble to count on.

Ejain's greatest allies had always been the common people and his subordinates, who had watched him up close as he used his abilities to triumph over neighboring countries in disputes. After the eldest Prince, whom the King had selected himself several years ago, passed away, the King averted his eyes from the political strife and quarrels among his children. He merely stated that if Ejain could quell the opposition of others on his own, he would grant him a place, but provided little in the way of substantial assistance.

And so, Ejain came to the Empire. If he could borrow the power of the Orr Empire, which Nelarn had once been a vassal to and still exerted a strong influence, it could help him claim his rightful place.

After succinctly explaining this situation, though not in great detail but enough for someone to roughly guess, Ejain stared intently at the red dots marked on the map with a furrowed brow.

"According to the last news I heard, my other brothers have already blocked all other routes," he said. "They will use every means to ensure that I cannot return to the motherland before the King passes away."

But the Great Sarain Forest was intertwined with many countries, so they could not completely block the path. Those from the Nelarn homeland who came to aid Ejain were already waiting in the middle of the forest, having arrived through other countries.

"Originally, I planned to pass through the forest by detouring along the borders of other countries in the middle..."

Even on the way there, they encountered assassins again. Ejain's expression darkened. Kishiar, as if reading his mind, spoke up.

"Our information is leaking."

"..."

"I suspected from the start that there would be no attacks near the destination, especially given how hurriedly we moved. There were no signs of information leakage from the liaisons we had shared with our side, so the problem is most likely on your end."

"I think... you're probably right."

Prince Ejain admitted to Kishiar's words. His attendants, who had been standing by his side, stiffened their shoulders all at once. A chilly, unreadable look passed over Kishiar's red eyes.

"Which side do you think is the problem? Outside? Or inside?"

"What are you talking about? There are no traitors among us!"

A servant, unknown to Yuder, shouted tremblingly. The other servants also looked at each other with doubtful faces.

"..."

Ejain said nothing. Shadows flickered between the eyes of the young Prince, who was staring down at the map with his lips covered by his hands resting on his knees.

Yuder felt he might understand why the Prince had kept rattling on about some trivial connections between them on his way here, talking only about the Cavalry and the Awakeners. He was in need of power to save the situation, and talented individuals to be by his side.

'Perhaps it was because I guessed that the wounded inner self that the Prince had briefly revealed when he said he was glad to have his life saved, wasn't just from the anger of not being able to handle the monster himself, but also included this aspect.'

The reason he didn't say what he originally intended to, even after going to the trouble of switching places with a servant, may have been a way to blind others' eyes for safety, Yuder thought, feeling a sudden chill down his spine.

"I'm sorry, but I can't be sure who has betrayed me. Everyone here was brought by me because I trust them. You, Commander, would know the weight of the people I chose to keep by my side out of the many who followed as messengers. The same applies to those waiting for me in the treacherous Great Sarain Forest."

Ejain's words transformed the expressions of the servants into a variety of shades. Kishiar also nodded as if understanding.

"Of course, I understand. Then, may we use another method to confirm?"

"...What method do you propose?"

Ejain lifted his head. Kishiar raised his hand lightly and pointed at someone.

"Kanna Wand."

"Yes, Commander."

"Is it possible?"

He didn't explicitly state the details, just like when he had tasked Yuder with cleaning up after a battle. However, everyone in the group understood his intention.

"I can't guarantee perfection. But... if you want it, Commander, I will certainly find even the smallest clue!"

The second Prince and his servants were taken aback by the confident voice that emerged from the seemingly ordinary, short-haired woman.

"Good."

Kishiar made a polite request to Ejain's servants.

"It won't take long. Could you please comply with her for a moment?"

"Wha... What do you want us to do?"

One servant questioned with a slightly scared expression, but Kanna only gave him a smile, not a reply.

"I need an object that has been in contact with your bodies for a long time. I'm not sure what would be best. Any recommendations?"

"My Prince. Should we listen to this nonsense?"

However, Prince Ejain averted his gaze from his servant and responded.

"Everyone, hand over the tokens you brought from the Nelarn Palace. She said it would only take a moment, so that should suffice."

"But, my Prince..."

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The attendants' faces were hardened, avoiding each other's gaze, hesitant, they only stared at the ground. The one who broke the uncomfortable silence was Melbon, the only one among the three attendants who had yet to speak a word of defiance to Prince Ejain.

"...If you truly believe there's no traitor among us, there's no reason to hesitate."

At his quiet voice, the other two attendants looked at him.

"We all swore to die for the prince if need be, that's why we came here. No matter what the prince does, he must return to Nelarn safely, and for that, we need their help. So, it's time to prove our loyalty."

Melbon reached into his pocket and pulled out a badge. The emblem was etched into a cloudy, milk-like gemstone, which at first glance looked similar to an accessory typically worn on a belt.

"..."

Yuder noticed that the hand Melbon used to hold the token was slightly trembling. It was impossible to tell if the trembling was simply due to nervousness, or if there was some other reason behind it.

Once Melbon took out his badge, the other attendants hesitated for a moment before doing the same. Kanna accepted the badge from the attendant who was on the far left. He was the one who had been defying Ejain's orders all this time, his face still clouded with doubt.

"What are you going to do with these?"

"We're going to read the information embedded within."

"Reading the information? What does that mean..."

Kanna didn't explain further. Instead, she closed her eyes while clenching the badges in both hands. After a moment, Yuder noticed a faint, flowing energy radiating from inside her hands. As the energy, which looked like a heat haze, grew stronger, so did the strength Kanna put into her grip. Her eyelids fluttered.

A moment later, Kanna opened her eyes. A complex emotion briefly flickered between her furrowed brows.

"...This badge, it's a token from the Second Prince, isn't it?"

"Yes... it is. I received it... on the day I was chosen as the Prince's personal attendant."

The attendant stuttered out the answer.

"So it's something you shouldn't pass to someone else. Right?"

"...Isn't that obvious? Anyone could guess that."

"Then why did you hand over such an important badge to someone?"

"What?"

Kanna's sharp blue eyes pierced the attendant's face. The pale attendant gulped, blinking rapidly.

"I... I don't know what you're talking about. I've never done that."

"You did. You gave it away and in return, you received something. Something written on a piece of paper..."

"Now, look here. It seems like you're making things up, saying that you're reading information. I'm not such an easy fool to fall for that. If you want to find the traitor, use a more credible method...!"

"The night before you left for the Empire, on a full moon night. At the end of the western corridor of the Balu Palace, in front of the blind sage's statue. The land of Musetti! Are you still going to say you don't remember?"

The attendant, who was about to shout to silence Kanna, froze at her following words.

"H...How?"

He was gasping for breath, his mouth agape.

"How do you... know?"

He stared in disbelief at Kanna, Prince Ejain, and his fellow attendants.

"Who, who told the Empire? Who is it? Who's trying to trap me..."

He seemed to believe that Kanna had not read the information, but that someone had informed her about him. Cold sweat streamed down over the wide-open eyelids of the man who was frantically insisting on his innocence.

"Your Highness. It's not me. Don't trust the words of this Imperial agent. I am...!"

"Musetti was one of the regions where the next administrator had not yet been determined."

Prince Ejain, who had been sitting with his body turned away from them, opened his mouth quietly.

"So, they told you they would give you the land if you betrayed me, Jenn?"

"No, Your Highness!"

The attendant, Jenn, shouted out straight away and shook his head.

"They did call me through Kindi the day before we left for the Empire. But as soon as I saw who was there, I immediately left without listening to a word! I'm innocent!"

"Then who is Dayla? Who is Dayla?"

However, Jenn's outcry was soon halted by Kanna's words that were heard again. While he remained silent, Prince Ejain responded slowly.

"It's the name of Jenn's wife, if my memory serves me right."

"Ah...ah."

Shivering, Jenn alternately looked at Ejain and Kanna. Kanna closed her lips tightly, then sighed and opened her mouth.

"She also borrowed this emblem. The reason was...to postpone your gambling debts in your stead with this emblem. You wanted to hide that. And it wasn't a very old event. Isn't it?"

"..."

"She said... the prince would never help with such a disgraceful matter."

Kanna's direct gaze targeted Jenn, who was retreating awkwardly with a pale face.

"Do you also deny this?"

"...Your Highness!"

Jenn, the attendant, covered his face and knelt.

"I...I said once would be enough. I was only asked to inform about who would accompany Your Highness before we left... But I was never... involved in this incident. That's the truth...! Please believe me!"

In the end, he crumbled. His voice, filled with fear, flowed out in a confused manner. As Prince Ejain silently watched him, Kishiar swiftly signaled to Emun.

"Emun, you said it's possible to temporarily trap a target other than yourself in darkness, right?"

"Yes. I'll trap him."

Quickly picking up on Kishiar's intention, Emun reached out his hand. Then, from above Jenn's head, a darkness like a falling veil covered him, swallowing even the screams he was making.

Everyone stayed silent as they observed the entity now concealed in darkness, invisible and inaudible, unable to recognize one another. After a moment, Prince Ejain cleared his throat and spoke.

"...When you mentioned the ability to read information, I doubted it. But I didn't expect you to find it so quickly. Truly, an impressive ability."

"I'm sorry, Second Prince, but the readings are still in progress."

Kishiar responded without a change in expression.

"We were lucky that the first person turned out to be the traitor, but whether it was 'only that one time' or 'from the very beginning', no one knows. You haven't forgotten his words just now, have you?"

The first attendant, Jenn, claimed that while it was true he had betrayed them, he had not given any information that could lead to an assassin. If this was true, it meant there could very well be more traitors.

"..."

"Of course, if you believe it to be enough, Prince, the Cavalry will not move further."

Upon hearing the cold statement, Prince Ejain's eyes darkened. Various emotions flitted across his painfully neutral expression, but in the end, the prince made but one choice.

"...Yes, you are correct, Commander. I am embarrassed by my haste. I will continue to rely on your guidance."

"Understood. Kanna, proceed."

The atmosphere among the remaining two servants grew even heavier. Kanna too, seemingly feeling a stronger sense of burden, exhaled softly. She glanced between the two servants, then reached out her hand to the servant standing closer to Melbon. He hesitated momentarily, but then wordlessly placed his symbol into her hand.

Kanna used her powers in the same manner as before. As she read the information, her furrowed face heated up, beads of sweat forming.

"..."

After a moment, she opened her eyes, her gaze shifting to the second servant. For some unknown reason, he merely kept his eyes lowered, looking at the floor. Kanna, watching his face, bit her lip, turning her head towards Melbon to speak.

"...I apologize, but before I speak about the information I read from his token, may I also read the one from the person next to you?"

What kind of information could she have read from the second token to make such a request? Someone, unable to bear the tension, swallowed dryly.

"Pl...please do so."

Melbon handed his own token to Kanna. A current of power, like a swirl of mist, shot wildly out of Kanna's hand, now holding the third token. Her small hand shivered uncontrollably under the pressure, her eyelashes trembling.

"Uh...hoo, ha..."

A moment later, as the power finally faded, Kanna drew in ragged breaths. Her blue eyes, revealed beneath her eyelids, flickered with an indiscernible emotion.

She looked at Prince Ejain, who was currently avoiding her gaze, and then bowed her head toward Kishiar.

"...I've finished reading, Commander."

"So, what did you learn?"

Kanna unusually hesitated for a moment. But she did not stop her answer.

"Each of the servants present here, for some reason, has passed on your information to others."

"..."

A terrifying silence followed. All doubted their own ears at the unexpected answer. The servants, too, couldn't utter a word.

"...Is that true?"

Kishiar, also seeming to think the result shocking, unusually reconfirmed the answer. Kanna nodded firmly.

"Yes."

Her gaze shifted to the second servant.

"He had already given up before he gave me his symbol, so it would be better for him to speak directly."

"...There really is nothing we can hide."

The second servant, as if resigned, clenched his fist tightly. But when everyone's gaze turned towards him, he immediately knelt before Ejain.

"I, Faity, have served you for a long time, Prince, and there was never a moment when I was not proud."

"...Then why."

Ejain quietly asked, avoiding the servant's gaze.

"Why did you betray me?"

"It wasn't betrayal. I only thought that if the direction of the path you were taking was wrong, I should correct it for you."

The servant answered, tears streaming down his face.

"How could you possibly think of borrowing the power of the Empire, Prince? Even if you deemed it necessary, you could never truly rise Nelarn upright through that method. You, of all people, should not have done so."

"So you handed over my information?"

"...I didn't wish for Your Highness to be endangered. I thought if you met those who would moderately hinder you and failed, you would return to the right path. The appearance of the monster was an unexpected event... but now that things have come to this, I have nothing more to say."

At a glance, his gaze still seemed to be filled with loyalty. Yet, the cold emotions hiding within were of a stubbornness and anger of a man who had failed to manipulate his lord to his own will. Prince Ejain closed his eyes as if in pain.

"...I always valued your audacity and kept you by my side. I explained the necessity of this journey to the Empire several times, and I thought everyone had accepted it. But this is how it's repaid."

"Haven't I also repeatedly advised you out of loyalty? Dealing with the Empire is a dangerous proposition. If you had decided to face the other princes directly like before, I wouldn't have had to go to these lengths!"

"And what of the innocent people of Nelarn?"

Prince Ejain countered with a dry voice.

"What about our citizens, exhausted from years of border conflicts and unstable politics, who've lost even the strength to fight? Knowing there is another way, should we sacrifice their lives for a meaningless battle among princes? Is that what you believe is right?"

"At this point, isn't whatever I add just the hollow rambling of a traitor?"

The servant who had revealed his name as Faity hunched over and let out a laugh.

"Having failed like this, I will not have the honor of serving you again. Please... may you live a long and healthy life."

The bowed servant seemed to tremble, overwhelmed by emotion. At that moment, Priest Lusan, who had been quietly observing the situation from afar, seemed to realize something and abruptly stood up and exclaimed.

"Hold on. Something is off. This person...!"

"Urgh, cough!"

But even before Lusan could finish his sentence, the servant coughed up dark blood and collapsed.

"He swallowed poison!"

"Quickly, turn him over!"

But by the time those around him rushed to turn him over, he had already breathed his last.

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"Ah..."

The faces of the Cavalry members froze as they saw the face of the traitor who had died in an instant. Yuder stared down at the corpse that Priest Lusan was frantically examining, lost in thought.

'He blustered about his loyalty till the end, but in reality, he used even his own death as a means to shake Prince Ejain. It's been a while since I've seen someone this selfish... or perhaps, even this is part of the plot devised by Ejain's enemies.'

In his past life, Yuder had encountered many individuals who veiled their crooked ambitions as loyalty, intending to shake their own lords, and even the whole country. Such people were not rare in the entourage of Emperor Katchian.

These types of individuals were loyal when their superiors followed the paths they desired. However, the moment things took a different turn, they would change their direction, claiming it was all for your sake, ready to tear your throat out. Even for someone with sharp eyes, it was no easy task to sift them out without the ability to read information like Kanna.

'In that sense, Prince Ejain's enemies have used their heads quite well.'

The moment Ejain decided to borrow the power of the Empire and the internal bonds weakened slightly, the enemies seized the opportunity to incite betrayal among his closest retainers.

Instead of outright inciting the Prince's aides to betray him from the start, they targeted the weak points in their loyalty, a truly cunning strategy. The intention seemed less about killing Ejain and more about causing internal decay, a clear sign of their thoughtful machinations.

Luckily this time, thanks to Kanna's presence, they were able to quickly pierce through the truth. But even if she hadn't been present, the Prince would have eventually needed to identify the traitor himself. They must have sown seeds of discord to ensure they could shake him regardless of who was caught.

Since ancient times, nothing could collapse an individual or a group more easily than internal betrayal. Even the strongest opponents were vulnerable to internal discord and attacks. That much was evident just by looking at Kishiar. Isn't the reason he almost sealed off all his powers, despite being as legendary as any, all due to internal issues?

'...Ah. I'm drifting off to that topic again.'

Yuder shook off the thoughts about Kishiar that had unintentionally surfaced.

While he was immersed in his thoughts, Lusan had finished examining the body. He closed the dead man's eyes, murmured a small prayer, and rose from his position.

"Priest Lusan. The cause of death?"

As Kishiar asked as if he had been waiting, Lusan replied with a stern face.

"As you all suspected, he swallowed poison. His left molar was discolored to a dark hue. I had only a moment to examine him, so I couldn't tell exactly what poison it was."

"The poison itself was something we all carried with us at all times. I never imagined it would be used like this."

Ejain slowly replied, looking down at the dead servant. His expression was unreadable, making it impossible to guess whether he felt anger or some other emotion.

"I see. Then there's no need to investigate the poison further. For now, let's clean up the body and move it elsewhere."

"Yes."

Without a word, the shadow clone of Gakane, best suited for such tasks, rose and moved the body. The only one left now was Melbon, who had kept his head bowed in silence the whole time.

"Melbon. Now, it's your turn last."

"..."

"Like the others, if you have something to say, say it."

Finally, the Prince's gaze turned to the last remaining servant. Melbon clenched his fists without uttering a word, but Yuder felt a complex mix of emotions deep within.

'Could it be that he too handed over the Prince's information...'

If he had even the slightest doubt about Kanna's abilities, he might have thought that she had misread something. It was an outcome he had not anticipated.

The other two servants were people they had met for the first time today, but Melbon had been at the Prince's side from the time in the imperial garden.

Even when they met again in the midst of fighting a monster, he had begged to save the Prince before even looking at Yuder, and he had been the first to reveal his token, which signified his

loyalty. The fact that even such a loyal servant had handed over the Prince's information was shocking.

Did the Prince truly have anyone he could trust around him? The more he saw, the more surprising and bitter it became.

"I...,"

Melbon finally opened his mouth. He raised his eyes to look at the Prince, who was scowling at him, and then lowered them again shortly after.

"I have nothing to say."

"Why not? I thought you would have the most to say?"

The Prince questioned softly with dark eyes.

"Because I can't understand your betrayal more than anyone else's."

At those words, Melbon's hands trembled slightly.

"You were more loyal than Jenn and Faity, and anyone else. You've been by my side for a long time, and you've even tried to sacrifice your life for me on several occasions. If you intended to betray me, you could have done so when I was powerless. A young prince sent alone to the border would have easily died with just a bit of tampering with his meals."

"..."

"Although you didn't show it, I believed that you would stay by my side until the moment I die. If there was anyone among my followers whom I could trust, I thought it would be you. But, were you betraying me too? Why?"

The voice devoid of high and low pitches felt more stinging, probably because the disappointment the Prince felt could vaguely be sensed.

"Was it money? Or was it honor? You don't have a family, so you wouldn't have been threatened. Did I ever treat you unfairly?"

Melbon kept his eyes tightly shut and said nothing. The Prince, who was waiting for an answer, finally showed a part of his emotion, perhaps out of anger towards him.

"Were your words about sending me to Nelarn safely also a lie? How little you must have thought of the ability of an Awakener who can read information to pull out the token with such confidence?"

"..."

"Answer me, Melbon. If you don't want to embarrass me any further in front of everyone."

"I...,"

Only then did Melbon open his mouth and answer with a stutter.

"What good will it do to say anything when it's all over? However... I would like to say that what I said to Jenn and Faity was not born out of deceit."

Melbon inhaled deeply and dropped to his knees.

"I never received any offers or threats from anyone, and Your Highness has never treated me unfairly. I didn't know that Jenn and Faity were conspiring with someone. I regret and am upset that I did not realize this sooner, but..."

"I really... I don't understand what you're saying."

A look of disbelief clouded the Prince's eyes.

"Are you trying to insist that the Cavalry member's claim about you handing over my information is a lie? That you're the victim here?"

At that, Melbon fell silent again. A flash of pain flickered over Ejain's eyes.

"Say it was about the money, say you didn't approve of the path I was taking. What do you gain from deceiving me in this way?"

"I had no intention of deceiving you, Prince..."

"Then tell me, why the hell did you betray me!"

Melbon was silent for a long while. Yuder cautiously observed Melbon's behavior, ensuring that a second disaster like the previous one wouldn't occur.

As time passed with no response, Ejain, unable to hide his disappointment, finally turned his head towards Kanna.

"It seems I have no choice but to borrow your power once again..."

"The last time...I passed on the Prince's information...was four years ago."

Before the request for assistance was even finished, a frail voice emerged from Melbon's mouth.

"The time when you, Prince, were able to leave the border and return to the palace... I had decided to quit my deceptive actions against you then. So, I... I am not innocent of the crime of betraying you, but I swear I have nothing to do with this recent incident."

Ejain's eyes widened. The others were equally shocked. If they didn't believe him, it was merely a more detailed excuse, but somehow, Yuder felt as though he was speaking the truth.

'...Come to think of it, wasn't what Kanna said simply the fact that 'all three of the Prince's attendants had handed over the Prince's information for some reason'?"

Kanna hadn't confirmed that the timing and recipients of the information handed over by the Prince's attendants were the same. Presumably, she hadn't been able to clearly read that part, hence the ambiguity.

The information Kanna read with her abilities was accurate, but not perfect.

It seemed the others also realized what Yuder had thought, their eyes wide with surprise. Kanna herself looked somewhat tense.

If it was not the case that all three attendants had handed over the Prince's information to the same person at the same time, and assuming Melbon's words were true, then even though his statement was covered by the information Kanna had read, it wasn't a lie.

"Four years ago?"

"...Yes."

"So you're saying that you had already been betraying me even before then? But no one considered me important back then, so who did you hand over my information to and when?"

Again, Melbon clammed up. Ejain watched him with a sharp and suspicious gaze.

"You're still alive, despite saying you had quit that job, which means one of two things: either the identity of the person is so shocking that you can't say it, or you've been forced to keep quiet about it."

"..."

"Which is it?"

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In the end, Melbon bowed deeply, laying flat on the floor.

"...It's not hard to speak. I admit that I was off guard, not expecting the Awakener to read even that old incident, but at the same time, I also had a feeling that this day would come."

Before revealing the truth, he hesitated, then managed to voice a single thought.

"However, I am... I'm concerned that due to today's events, the Prince will face difficulties, only that weighs heavily on me."

His words caused Prince Ejain, who seemed about to respond, to close his mouth helplessly.

Ejain must have sensed it. Out of all the attendants, Melbon was the only one who genuinely cared about him, not for himself.

"That's not for you to worry about. Stop making excuses and just speak."

"Yes, of course..."

Melbon, still bowing deeply, let out a long sigh, then hesitantly continued.

"In truth, I was a person who entered the palace with the purpose of observing and reporting on the Prince's surroundings from the beginning."

His confession was shocking from the start.

"But as I served the Prince, I increasingly wanted to devote my loyalty as a real attendant, and eventually, the thought of fulfilling my original purpose in entering the palace disappeared. Hence, from the moment four years ago when the Prince established a merit at the national border and returned to the palace, I completely severed my ties with them."

"If they had the power to plant someone in the palace, wouldn't they have let you go so easily?"

"I was prepared to deal with that much when I made my decision. And in fact, there have been no issues so far."

Evidently, Melbon was not as unprepared as he seemed.

'After all, despite the danger of revealing another traitor among the retainers, he took the initiative to provoke the atmosphere.'

Who, then, had planted Melbon in the palace? And why had they decided to keep an eye on Ejain from his youth, long before he showed his prominence?

"So, who exactly were those people who sent you?"

Ejain looked at Melbon's face and slowly muttered names he speculated.

"You said it wasn't the other princes, and those who would have been interested in me since my insignificant childhood... The third queen? Or Lady Marenta?"

"..."

"Count Blobs? General Kemel? Former Head Courtier Philliamet?"

"..."

Despite saying it was during his insignificant childhood, the names that came up were seemingly endless. Ejain, who kept repeating unfamiliar names regardless of the changing expressions of everyone around him, sighed heavily and paused for a moment when no answer came.

"Could it be the King, my father?"

That was a name he seemed reluctant to bring up, in a voice filled with apprehension. And at that name, for the first time, Melbon also reacted.

"Was it really the King?"

"No."

Melbon, still bowing, shook his head in denial.

"Really, it's not."

"Then what the hell are you saying?"

The Prince's gaze hovered over Melbon's head.

"It's not this, it's not that... Even if you were a spy for Durban, I wouldn't be surprised, so just give me an answer."

"..."

In that moment, the atmosphere surrounding Melbon changed. Although no words were spoken, everyone watching him knew something was amiss.

The fact that Prince Ejain had just pressed the answer was what had occurred.

"...Durban. Is it really Durban?"

Ejain asked slowly. Melbon's shoulders quivered.

"I apologize, Your Highness..."

All emotions washed away from Prince Ejain's face in a moment. He stayed silent for a long time, with his kneeling servant before him.

And at that moment, Yuder remembered a piece of brief information from his previous life that he had forgotten.

'Rumor has it that King Ejain of Nelarn's biological mother was executed for colluding with Durban.'

It was information he had read before meeting the young new King of Nelarn as Yudrain Aile, the second Commander of the Cavalry and the ambassador representing the Orr Empire.

Durban and Nelarn were two of the countries bordering each other, with the Great Sarain Forest in between, and their relationship was particularly bad. Small local wars happened almost daily along the border area for decades, so the sentiment between the two countries could not be worse.

It was known that King Ejain struggled as there were hardly any relatives to help him during his Prince days. If the information he just recalled was true, it was natural. The reason he, who should have lived enviously as the Second Prince, spent a long time in the harsh border area and returned, and why he struggled to gather internal forces despite his excellent abilities, was suddenly convincing.

What emotions would one feel upon hearing that a spy from such an enemy country had been placed by his side since childhood?

The reason this question, which he would not have thought about if it were someone else's problem, came to Yuder's mind was simple. He momentarily saw Kishiar and himself in the Prince, who was extremely generous to his subordinates, and the servant who served him with a lie but eventually became sincerely loyal.

Yuder looked down at his hand, hidden inside the black glove. Kishiar did not hide anything from him, but Yuder was different. If weighed by the burden of the secrets kept from the one he served, there would be none heavier than him in this place.

Feeling uncomfortable as if a corner of his heart was scratched, Yuder turned his head. Around that time, Prince Ejain also seemed to have made up his mind and opened his mouth.

"...I believe we have uncovered all that needs to be discovered. Please release Jenn now."

The Prince did not speak any further to Melbon. As he turned his body and asked Kishiar, Emun immediately absorbed the darkness and released Jenn, who had been trapped.

"Oh, Your Highness! Please, just... just one more time...!"

The man, drenched in sweat, trying to cling straight to the Prince, stopped speaking with a choked groan the moment he saw the body of Faity lying not far from the kneeling Melbon.

"Ah.... Ah."

"Jenn, Melbon."

Prince Ejain spoke to the servants with an unprecedentedly cold voice.

"Your punishment will be decided after returning to Nelarn. Until then, suicide and self-harm are forbidden, and if you try to escape, you will be killed instantly."

A rigid wall formed over his face, which had been somewhat playful and humane until then. Surprisingly, that face was most similar to the face of King Ejain that Yuder knew in his previous life.

Jenn, seemingly deeming it difficult to change his lord's mind no matter what he said, slumped onto the spot and hung his head in despair.

"I do not wish to see your faces any longer. Leave."

Upon hearing the Prince's order to his attendants, Kishiar immediately gave a signal to his subordinates.

"Hinn, Finn. Lock them up in the upstairs bedroom."

"Yes. Understood."

The two servants were quietly escorted to the second floor, firmly gripped by the strong arms of the brother-sister duo who were more powerful than they appeared. Ejain kept his face turned away from them until the end.

"...I am deeply ashamed to show you such a sight after you've all traveled so far to assist me."

When everyone around had finally quieted down, the Prince stood up and bowed respectfully in front of everyone. The sight was more than enough to discomfort the Cavalry members, who were already at a loss on how to react to the Prince's overly revealed personal affairs.

"There's no need to worry about this incident leaking out."

Yet, Kishiar did not even blink and even smiled instead. When he gave a response to protect the Prince's honor and looked around at the Cavalry members, they all bowed their heads in unison, promising not to mention anything outside.

"Well then, may I ask how you plan to determine your return route to Nelarn?"

As if what had just transpired didn't matter at all, Kishiar promptly changed the topic. His behavior could easily infuriate others, yet Prince Ejain merely responded with a weary smile.

"I am growing increasingly convinced that there is no other way."

"So, you mean you intend to pass through the Great Sarain Forest without any changes in the plan?"

Ejain replied while looking at the western map still spread out on the table.

"Yes. I will return to Nelarn as soon as possible."

"Hmm... even if the Cavalry decides they cannot assist due to the excessive risk?"

Kishiar asked, with a playful smile on his face. Yuder guessed that this was probably Kishiar's way of testing Ejain.

'It's eerily similar to the attitude I saw when I took the Cavalry entrance test. It's kind of nostalgic...'

"I am aware that the Commander and the Cavalry came to help me, not to sacrifice their lives. How can I force you to continue if you deem the journey ahead too dangerous during the travel?"

Ejain calmly responded, then after a pause, he looked straight into Kishiar's eyes and continued in a slightly lower voice.

"In that case, I will proceed alone."

"Alone, with the two treasonous servants?"

"Yes."

"I have heard that you led many victories in a protracted local war with Durban through brilliant strategy, Prince Ejain, but doesn't this sound like a reckless answer?"

"I might not know what the world thinks of me, but I am not someone with extraordinary abilities. I have simply never given up in front of an enemy."

I have simply never given up in front of an enemy.

At that potent statement, everyone's attention was instantly drawn to him. Ejain just stood confidently under that gaze. The Prince, who was neither an exceptional Swordsman nor a Mage and not even an Awakener yet, showed no signs of intimidation, even in a situation without his loyal servants by his side.

"That's an impressive statement, but it doesn't help with actual survival."

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"Yes, I agree. But if I refuse to give up and press onward, surely His Majesty the Emperor and Commander wouldn't leave such recklessness unattended. I, being both foolish and cowardly, can only believe in that."

'What would Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar receive from Ejain?'

What could it be? It wasn't just about choosing the most fitting person to sit on the throne of Nelarn to help, but receiving something in return? It was common for nations that have helped each other in times of difficulty to promise diplomatic, or military aid when things went well in the future. Yet, Ejain's words didn't seem to imply that.

Alternating his gaze between Ejain's face, which was looking at Kishiar as if awaiting an answer, and Kishiar's eyes that maintained a wall of silence behind a steady smile, Yuder pondered.

"...I suppose I should retract my statement about recklessness."

Kishiar, whose gaze had been studying the intentions of each other, responded in a much softer voice.

"Foolhardiness backed by sufficient calculation is not gambling, but rather a match. Indeed, Your Highness the Second Prince is worthy to be called a player."

"That's a generous compliment."

At Ejain's calm response, Kishiar bowed his head.

"No, if I said anything to upset you during our conversation, I apologize."

Although he didn't say it directly, it seemed that Ejain's response was quite satisfactory from Kishiar's point of view. Yuder thought, watching the light flash briefly over his red irises, that this man was truly unchanging in that aspect.

"There's no need for concern. Given what has happened, it's only natural for the Empire to confirm whether or not I'm a person who can keep promises."

"Ha ha, it seems I've shown my hand."

Kishiar let out an exaggerated laugh as if his inner thoughts had been exposed.

"Even though you've deviated from the original plan and came to help me personally, I've felt more than enough goodwill from the side of Orr Empire. No matter what happens, there will be no breaking of the original promise."

"It's a good start, with such warm words exchanged between us."

With a cheerful response, Kishiar rose from his seat and approached Ejain.

"You must be tired if we are to depart at the break of dawn tomorrow, so please retire early today. Outside of the Second Prince's bedroom and the room where the servants are detained, our Cavalry members will take turns standing guard all night, so there's no need to worry."

"Thank you for your consideration."

The two men extended their hands once again for a handshake. Their meeting felt slightly different from the first time.

"I always thought being born a prince meant living happily ever after, but it doesn't seem that way today."

After Kishiar and Ejain returned to their respective rooms, the Cavalry members who remained in the reception room to sort out the guard shifts for the servants were noticeably less cheerful than before.

"How could all three servants be traitors? The Prince seemed like such a great man..."

Upon hearing Emun's serious murmurs, Gakane patted his back as a sign of consolation and agreement.

"Don't take it too hard, Emun. We were fortunate to find out early and resolve the issue, thanks to Kanna. If we had remained ignorant, things could have gotten worse. The Prince probably thinks the same."

"I suppose... but it still doesn't sit well with me."

Sitting next to Emun, who was sniffing gloomily, Kanna didn't have much of a cheerful expression either. Ordinarily, she would have comforted Emun along with Gakane, but for now, she just silently stared at the piece of paper on which the night watch order was written, her eyes dimmed.

After the night watch order was finalized, Yuder, still doing the cleaning up, stealthily approached the still dazed Kanna and struck up a conversation.

"Kanna, are you upset because of what happened earlier?"

"Oh...Yuder."

Kanna looked at Yuder in surprise, but soon managed a faint smile.

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

"If there's something on your mind, don't hold it in. Feel free to talk about it with anyone. It's not good to have burdens, especially when on a mission."

Despite her assurances, Yuder seemed not to believe her. Kanna, seeing the concern on Yuder's face, fell silent and looked around. There were no colleagues within earshot. As soon as Yuder approached Kanna, everyone seemed to understand they were about to have a conversation and tactfully gave them space.

"...Did I look that serious?"

"A bit."

"That's strange. I used to hide such things well... maybe being in the Cavalry has made my facial muscles too loose."

As she playfully patted her cheek, Kanna managed a slightly embarrassed smile.

"But honestly, it's not because of that. It's not unrelated... I was thinking about something else."

"Something else?"

"Yes. About our Cavalry."

Kanna gazed at the ground and let out a long sigh.

"When even the servants who have served the Second Prince of Nelarn for so long betray him, I wonder if the Cavalry will remain unscathed? I suddenly had such a thought."

"..."

"Well... even if there are traitors, we may not be able to identify them, but the future is never certain, right? I remembered when the assassins came for our Commander... While they were unknown assassins then, we don't know what might happen in the future... Ugh. I'm saying such unlucky things."

Seemingly unhappy with her own words, Kanna scratched her head again and looked up at Yuder.

"Anyway, through this incident, I realized my ability still has much room to improve, and I need to work harder. Of course, I don't like to doubt my colleagues who have been with me all this time, but I should make sure there are no gaps like today at crucial moments."

Although her words were appreciated, Yuder remembered Kanna's secret worry about her growing abilities, something she had shared only with him. Her ability to read information had been developing to the point where she could sometimes perceive the emotions of those around her, even when she didn't want to. He remembered her confession, and how she looked at that moment.

Reading information is certainly a great ability, but Yuder didn't want her to continue developing in a direction that caused her pain to identify a traitor.

This was a thought he would have found difficult to comprehend in his past life as Yuder Aile.

"You don't have to do that."

With such intent, Yuder replied softly.

"If it turns out there is such a person in the Cavalry, I'll handle it before they get to the other members or the Commander."

"What?"

"You saw it. Even that time you mentioned..."

In the place they had set out to recover the Red Stone, Kishiar had been ambushed by assassins, and Yuder had dealt with them single-handedly, with little difficulty. Of course, it was crucial to foresee information, but ultimately, if they couldn't handle the situation right before their eyes, it was all in vain. And Yuder, more than anyone, was confident in that regard.

"So, you don't need to worry about the Cavalry members."

Kanna blinked at Yuder with an odd expression on her face. After a moment, her lips, which seemed to be about to say something, broke into a smile.

"Ah, you're right. Here I was, fretting over unnecessary worries while we have you, the most capable of our members, assisting the Commander."

He hadn't said all that, but as long as Kanna looked brighter, it seemed to be alright.

With her concerns resolved, Kanna strolled leisurely back to her room. Yuder followed her, entered his bedroom, and, before long, encountered Nathan Zuckerman who had just returned.

"When did you arrive?"

"I just reported back to Duke after returning and heard about the events that occurred in the meantime. Since the Cavalry members is taking care of internal surveillance, our Peletta Knight decided to take turns guarding the outside of the quarters. So, if you need assistance, let us know."

Nathan Zuckerman did not attach his personal opinion on the unfortunate incident involving Prince Ejain. It was a judicious action fitting his character. After hearing Yuder's acknowledgment, Nathan went back outside for a late meal.

Yuder was left alone and rechecked his guard duty roster. His shift would be at the deep end of dawn, so it seemed like a good idea to rest early, if possible.

'...'

No sound reached him as he lay in the bed adjacent to the next room. Yuder recalled Kishiar, who had been so engrossed in examining the map earlier that he wouldn't have heard even if someone had called out to him.

He had told Ejain that if the journey to the Great Sarain Forest seemed too dangerous, he could choose not to go. However, if Kishiar was considering backing out that easily, would he have needed to scrutinize the map so carefully?

'I had thought that his decision to be part of the first dispatch team wasn't entirely because he said I was too reckless... It's clear he judged it to be a dangerous mission that wouldn't be an overreaction for all of us to undertake.'

Then what could Ejain have promised as a price to Emperor Kailusa and Kishiar?

It was something that probably did not occur in his previous life, so even if he tried to speculate, there was not even a slight hint that could help him guess.

Yuder looked at the old wall made of piled-up wood for a while before closing his eyes.

"Get up, Gakane. It's my turn now."

"...Ah. Is it already time for a shift change?"

As dawn arrived, Yuder who had opened his eyes immediately put on his outerwear, grabbed his sword, and stepped out into the corridor. Gakane, who was sitting half-asleep in a chair nearby, stood up energetically with a happy face.

"Why did you come so early? I could've done it a bit longer."

"What are you talking about? You were dozing off because you're tired."

Wasn't it Gakane who was tired because he used a lot of his abilities? Yuder, on the other hand, had been worried about his own body for being overly fine.

As he questioned with such intentions, a hint of redness spread over Gakane's handsome face.

"Ah. Right. You came out earlier because of me? Sorry..."

"You don't need to apologize for this. It's only natural."

Gakane, who was usually a superbly built man that didn't lose to anyone in terms of stamina, had a different issue when it came to fatigue from using his abilities. Since it was the first time he had used them so much in actual combat, his internal energy would have been greatly depleted.

"Go rest."

"Yeah. Thanks, Yuder."

After making a short report that no sounds had come from the rooms of the servants and Ejain during his guard duty, Gakane returned to his bedroom. Yuder sat in the chair where Gakane had been sitting and looked around.

'It feels like it's been a long time since I've done something like this.'

Staying alert alone wasn't easy, but he had his own way of managing. Yuder spent the time vacantly, recalling the abilities he had used that day and thinking about his past training regimen.

Not long after, he suddenly felt a faint movement from inside Prince Ejain's room.

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If anything were to happen, he was ready to jump in at a moment's notice, every nerve in his body on high alert. A moment later, the door opened revealing the room's inhabitant. Prince Ejain, with a slightly absent look on his face, slowly stepped out of the room. Spotting Yuder seated, he stopped in his tracks.

"...Is there a problem?"

Yuder, not having initiated the conversation, asked the question lightly while studying the prince's state.

"I woke up and found there was no water."

Under normal circumstances, before the prince even had the chance to seek water, his attendants would have catered to his needs. But the current situation was somewhat unique. Looking at Ejain's impassive face, now devoid of any attendants to fetch him water, Yuder rose from his seat.

"I can fetch it for you. You needn't leave your room."

"No need for that. I can fetch and drink it myself."

Yuder couldn't help but think that the prince was using the need for water as an excuse to escape the stifling confines of his room, his claim of waking up unexpectedly a likely lie. Using his abilities to fetch the water was simple, but if that wasn't what the prince wanted, he couldn't forcefully confine him to the room.

Yuder stood, alternating his gaze between the retreating back of the prince and the attendants' room, contemplating who to follow. If asked to choose between the prince and the attendants, naturally, he would gravitate towards Ejain.

"If that's the case... I will assist you."

"Despite me saying it's okay."

The prince headed towards the kitchen, where they had eaten dinner. His darkened gaze didn't seek the water jug but roamed around aimlessly in the distance. In the end, Ejain stopped by a rain-streaked window, silently staring outside for a long time. Although the night was deep and the rain had almost ceased, the faint sound of drizzling could still be heard if one listened closely.

Just when Yuder was hesitating, wondering if Ejain intended to remain standing until everyone else woke up, the prince finally opened his mouth, murmuring low.

"...There's a well outside."

True to his words, there was a covered well right in front of the kitchen window. When Yuder offered no response, Ejain turned towards the small side door tucked in the corner of the kitchen.

Yuder debated if he should warn him of the danger outside or let him be, hoping the freedom would ease his troubled heart. Amidst this dilemma, he decided to follow the prince. Instead of dropping like raindrops, the misty rain that filled the air soaked their hair as soon as they stepped outside.

Yuder silently motioned with his hand to scatter the raindrops that were soaking their heads, causing Ejain to look back.

"...You don't need a raincoat to block the rain either."

"No, I don't."

"Having an assistant like you, the Commander must feel truly reassured."

He wasn't sure how to respond to that. When Yuder stayed silent, it seemed Ejain hadn't expected a reply and turned his head back. He neither opened the well cover nor did he move elsewhere, just stood there, staring at it.

"Yuder Aile, are you aware that the history of Nelarn predates Orr?"

"No, I wasn't."

"The First Emperor of the Empire, after thwarting the Great Destruction and establishing Orr, forged an eternal alliance with the countries that had assisted him. They promised not to infringe upon each other and always help as allies. Though this alliance broke down and morphed into its current form due to becoming vassal states in later generations, remnants of the past are still scattered here and there in Nelarn."

The languid voice merged with the gentle patter of rain, becoming a distant echo.

"Suppose... yes. Just like the statue of the blind sage in the palace of Nelarn."

The statue of the blind sage was the spot that Kanna had identified as the meeting place where one of his attendants had conspired in betrayal. As the statue was mentioned, a cold, bitter smile briefly flickered across Ejain's face before disappearing.

"The Nelarn believe that the sage is Luma, the Archmage who left the Empire. The Empire has denied it, of course."

"..."

"I can't verify the truth, but there are a few relics in Nelarn said to be left by the blind sage. I've promised to hand one over to Orr."

His words flowed calmly, but their content was shocking. Yuder, curious all along, tried to gauge the thoughts of Prince Ejain as he revealed this fact. Finding no answers, he maintained his silence.

Perhaps it was his lack of surprise that prompted Ejain to smile.

"I see you're not surprised. Did the Commander already discuss this with you? Or is this again that look of surprise you're going to claim?"

This was a reference to something Yuder had said when they had met in the palace gardens. Yuder maintained silence for a moment longer, then shook his head.

"I was pondering why you chose to share this with me."

"You're the only one here who I can say I've known for a while. It's good to have someone to talk to."

"..."

"And you're one of the few who look at me without pity."

He had seemed indifferent to the attitudes of the Cavalry, but had he been aware all along? Yuder felt a little awkward as he made a small apology on behalf of his comrades.

"I apologize for their disrespectful behavior."

"It's okay. It must have been unavoidable. I understand. It's been just as unbelievable for me, imagine how those observing must have felt."

Ejain murmured casually and looked intently into Yuder's eyes.

"The only reason I brought this up is that I had a question to ask, considering you also serve a superior."

"What is it?"

Yuder took a step closer to Ejain to hear him more clearly.

"If someone stood in the way of the person you serve, what do you think would be the best way to handle it?"

The question seemed to stem from the words left behind by the now-deceased attendant. Yuder furrowed his brow and answered curtly.

"If it's about what the one who died today said, I think it's not worth worrying about."

"Of course, I'm not bothered by his words. I followed the path I thought was right after much contemplation. I believe it's better to negotiate with the Empire and progress towards peace more quickly, instead of clinging to relics that Nelarn doesn't immediately need and risking internal conflict. But... if those who think I'm wrong continue to appear, what should I do?"

Ejain quietly responded.

"Unlike you all, I don't have any power. My power comes solely from those who trust me. But if my decisions keep causing unnecessary conflict among them, won't the path I want to take become even more distant? As a loyal subordinate like you, I wonder who you would want to serve and hence, I wanted to hear your thoughts."

If that's what he wanted, Yuder could give a satisfactory answer.

"Then there is even less need for you to entertain such thoughts."

"Why?"

"Because it does not matter what choice you make."

Ejain arched an eyebrow, as if asking what that meant.

"Is this some sort of reassurance... that such events won't occur in the future? That's not what I was asking about."

"My response was not intended in that way either."

"Then what?"

"I meant just what I said."

Despite the odd sensation of elaborating to Ejain, Yuder tried to keep his answers as concise as possible.

"I have decided to believe that whichever path and whichever choice the person I serve makes, it is the right one. So, their choices, even when confronted with those who block their path, have nothing to do with me."

Although he had always held these thoughts, voicing them felt strangely satisfying. He had started to believe in Kishiar's path, his choices, because remembering his past experiences revealed they were far better than his own attempts, which had only resulted in failure and death.

How had their relationship, initially as dry as a desert, changed so much? Not just his physical form, but his thoughts, feelings, and values had all been entangled with Kishiar since that moment, and they were still evolving.

Ejain was silent for a while. His violet pupils, appearing black in the dim light, narrowed.

"Isn't that too... blind? I may be the last person who should be saying this, but even those who stand above are not always right. Your words sound like those of a devout priest."

'Perhaps.'

Yuder responded internally to Ejain's words. That doubt was indeed a tiny thorn forever embedded in his heart.

'Is it normal to be so drawn to Kishiar? How can I be sure this choice is not a mistake?'

But the answer was always the same. Whenever he stood by Kishiar's side and looked at him, he was reassured that his decision was right.

"I don't think I am particularly blind. Surely, such people already exist by the side of the Second Prince."

With such thoughts, Yuder gave another answer. However, Ejain, apparently finding his words empty, gave a small laugh and soon wiped his expression clean.

"That's comforting to hear. I understand. It's truly enviable to learn the Empire has so many treasures I cannot possess."

After saying that, Ejain hesitated for a moment. A question, seemingly suppressed throughout, slipped out from him in a whisper.

"...But how can you trust the person you serve to such an extent? Is it because of the power they possess?"

'So he's talking about power again. Was that so important to him?'

Of course, power was important. In his past life, Yuder too had felt oppressed by Kishiar's power and had no choice but to follow his words. But not anymore.

"I am sorry, but I do not wish to answer that. Not because your words are correct, but because I believe they should not be."

At his cold response, Ejain blinked.

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At the cool reply, Ejain blinked his eyes.

He possibly did not understand the meaning of Yuder's words, but it didn't matter. He didn't expect him to comprehend his intentions right away.

Having power didn't mean one could get everything they wanted. The best example of this was Yuder Aile's past life, which ended miserably. What was needed to gain something was sometimes not brute strength, but a gentle word or enduring patience. Among the Cavalry members, the majority had not yet seen Kishiar use his abilities properly.

It was a tremendous insult to everything he had suppressed and endured so far, and to what he had achieved in the end, for those around Kishiar to say they were following him merely because of his power and authority. At least, that's how Yuder felt now.

Was it because of power that they followed? There could be no more meaningless question than that.

"...Did I upset you somehow?"

Ejain asked, sensing that the answer was unusual. To be precise, Yuder wasn't angry but was feeling as though he was seeing his past self, so he shook his head.

"No."

He stared quietly at the young prince who was slightly frowning.

When Yuder first met King Ejain in his past life, he had seen him as an iron wall. He barely sensed any human emotion from his expressionless face, surrounded by a hard wall, as he sat on the throne. He seemed less like a human named Ejain and more like 'the King of Nelarn' itself.

The people of Nelarn admired the young king who strengthened the country's power and protected them, but they were always troubled. This was the case even though he had never committed any tyranny.

Those who had headed towards the diplomatic mission with Yuder said that such a character of Ejain was very similar to Yuder. Only now, facing the present Ejain and recalling those words he hadn't cared about at that time, he somehow understood what they had meant.

Having realized this, a new concern flowed through Yuder's mind.

'Is it really for the best to let him follow the same path as in the past?'

Even if he safely returned to Nelarn, if he remained as he is now, it would be nothing but a repetition of his past life. Becoming the illustrious King Ejain might not be a bad outcome, but he didn't feel it would be the best for him.

Once you believe that power provides all the answers, you eventually disregard everything else. But as a human being, you can't ignore everything else in life. Even if you consider it fine, it ends up being a twisted, distorted life.

Yuder fell into deep thought for a moment. If he could let him know beforehand about the realities he had realized upon meeting Kishiar, wouldn't he be able to understand that power isn't everything even after awakening and gaining strength? It seemed much better than him not trusting those around him with a desperate and empty face.

'It wouldn't hurt to at least try.'

Knowing that there was still time until Ejain's awakening made Yuder decide.

After hesitating for a moment, Yuder opened his mouth.

"Prince, I might be overstepping my bounds, but may I share a few words with you?"

"Go ahead."

Ejain seemed to give consent in his reply.

"Your Highness desires the power to overcome the crisis, correct? What if, one day, you suddenly became an Awakener? Not just any Awakener, but one strong enough to not lose to anyone."

"Are you predicting something right now?"

Ejain asked back with a curious look in his eyes.

"Do you also possess the ability to foresee?"

"I do not possess such an ability; I am just inquiring."

A fleeting disappointment surfaced on Ejain's face before quickly disappearing.

"Well, I desired it, but I never thought about it in detail. However, if I were to obtain such power... I'd probably be overjoyed. I'd be able to eliminate all the threats that have been causing trouble for me and Nelarn."

Ejain sighed, the corner of his mouth lifting into a quick smile before returning to his usual expression.

"And what do you think it would be like after you've eliminated all these threats?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you believe that even more people will follow you, compared to now?"

That was an extremely direct and dangerous statement. Although it was said trusting in Ejain's character, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't take it badly.

However, it also served as the perfect answer to Ejain's question, 'Do they follow Kishiar because of his power?'

Yuder, sensing something, offered his last words quietly toward Ejain, who had tightly shut his mouth.

"If you cannot answer, please observe while you're returning to Nelarn how I and others serve the Commander. That's all I wanted to say."

They did not continue the conversation and returned into the house. Ejain remained silent until the moment he entered his room.

The fact that he did not get angry at Yuder's words seemed close to saying he would consider it. If, until the end, his mind does not change and he continues to believe only in power, it would end there. However, Yuder decided to hope that he would realize something.

"Sir Aile. I'll be outside keeping an eye on the Nelarn servants and preparing the horses. Please escort the Duke and come out with the others."

"Understood."

The long night had passed and dawn had broken. The sky was impeccably clear as if it had never been cloudy. Yuder, taking Nathan's place who had gone out first, headed again towards Kishiar's bedroom.

"Commander, I am entering."

After knocking and waiting a moment, he turned the doorknob. Kishiar, having readied himself from head to toe, greeted him.

"It seems time to depart."

"Yes."

"We're leaving without having a proper meal. Aren't you hungry?"

"That's something I should be asking you."

"I'm okay, but it doesn't sit well with me thinking that my assistant is hungry."

With his usual smiling face, Kishiar, in a playful tone, suddenly took out something from his pocket and handed it over. Surprised, Yuder took it and lowered his head to see a small candy wrapped in paper. Recognizing it as a product from a shop he had received from before, he identified it immediately.

"...Commander?"

"You haven't eaten it in a long time, aren't you starting to miss it? Have a bite first."

"What do you mean? More importantly, when did you pack this into your luggage, seriously...?"

'I'm starting to miss it? What nonsense is that? I've never once brought it to mind.' Yuder immediately shook his head, yet due to the insistent command to "absolutely put one in your mouth before you go," he had no choice but to open the wrapper and put a candy in his mouth.

Kishiar, seeing Yuder, who had fallen silent while sucking on the candy, looked incredibly pleased, a smile playing on his face.

"Is it good?"

"...It tastes the same as before."

"That means it's good."

Kishiar nodded satisfactorily and ruffled Yuder's hair. Yuder, surprisingly unperturbed, had grown accustomed to these abrupt acts. Humans truly were quick to adapt.

"But why are you really giving me this?"

"Didn't I tell you? I was worried you might get hungry."

Kishiar, who had been leading the way, answered lightly, turning his head.

"Or should I say that I am pleased you have brought the prince, who slipped out last night, back without any problem? Does that make you feel more at ease?"

Yuder unknowingly paused in his tracks.

"...Did you not sleep?"

"Don't worry. I did rest. However, I was just cautious, in case an abnormal situation arose."

Yuder began to wonder just how much Kishiar had been aware of from within the room. He wanted to believe that he hadn't overheard the conversation he'd had with Ejain, but he wasn't sure.

'I didn't have a conversation worth eavesdropping on... But I still hope he didn't.'

The problem was that it was Kishiar. As Yuder maintained his silence, suppressing the faint tremor in his heart, Kishiar added more detail.

"At first, I was concerned when he slipped out, but he returned not long after. I figured there was no need for me to go out too."

"...Yes. As you say, there was no major issue. He just went down to drink water and then wanted to get some fresh air, so he visited the well in front of the kitchen."

"I see. Even if he looks fine, his stomach will likely remain unsettled for a while. Be prepared to respond immediately without panic to any unexpected actions."

"I understand."

Fortunately, his concerns hadn't materialized. Yuder silently followed him down. Everyone was already prepared and waiting. Shortly after, Nathan, who had brought several regular horses and a small wagon with the Peletta Knights besides the Misty Wind Horse they had yesterday, approached Kishiar, bowing his head.

"Your Grace, you've arrived."

"Yes, Nathan. You've done well. It must've been bothersome to secure the horses and the wagon overnight."

"The others had prepared extra horses, just in case. The praise should go to them."

Only then did Yuder realize why Nathan had hurriedly left last night. Nathan handed the regular horses to the Peletta Knights, and placed two servants, whose hands were tied, into the wagon. They kept their heads bowed without any resistance.

"We will follow behind, watching over them. Your Grace, please proceed as planned."

"Very well. No matter how quickly we move, we'll be held up once we enter the great forest, so ensure you regularly check for the signals I'll send from this side."

The Misty Wind Horse that Nathan Zuckerman had originally ridden was taken over by Prince Ejain. After giving a complicated glance towards the wagon in which the servants were seated, Ejain promptly mounted the horse.

Chapter 248

"From now on, regardless of how late we might be, our objective is to reach the western border area adjacent to the Great Sarain Forest within three days."

Having verified everyone was mounted and ready, Kishiar, at the front of the group, calmly made the declaration, turning to face them.

"We have chosen the best route based on the information brought by the Peletta Knights who have been in the West, but unexpected circumstances will undoubtedly arise. This journey will probably be more difficult than any we've encountered thus far... but I trust in all of you."

"Yes."

There was a strange power in the word 'trust' that flowed from Kishiar's mouth. Seeing no signs of struggle from anyone, and with their eyes shining in response, Kishiar reciprocated with a bright smile. He then flipped the hood of his cloak over his head to obscure his face, and raised his hand.

"Let's set out."

All at once, several horses surged forward in a thunderous gallop. The sunlight, just beginning to peek over the horizon, evenly bathed everyone from above. Due to this, Yuder had little difficulty noticing that Prince Ejain, riding nearby, was fixating his gaze on Kishiar's back.

He could not determine what the prince was thinking, but decided to believe that the journey had started well.

In the heart of the western part of the Orr Empire, Baron Willhem, the lord of the city of Tainu, furrowed his brows as he read a letter hastily delivered by a courier from the capital.

"I may be a mere caretaker of someone else's territory, but even so, as the master of the Willhem family who has long held responsibility for Tainu, Duke Tain's behavior is too much."

"What's the matter, my lord?"

In response to the butler's inquiry, Baron Willhem voiced his complaint loudly.

"Duke Peletta sends his newly formed Cavalry here, and still they haven't arrived in the West. The Duke continues to berate me about their delay and their whereabouts. Given that their home base is in the Capital, wouldn't it be more fitting for the Duke to personally look into this matter?"

"Indeed. How could the baron, busy as you are with governing Tainu, be expected to keep track of such trivial matters."

Despite the butler's placating response, the baron's mood did not improve.

"Since the Duke announced that this Cavalry, or whatever they are, was departing from the Capital to the West, and requested me to look after them, it's been nothing but a nuisance. What's the big

deal about them coming here to help us? Whether they come here and engage with monsters, whether they die or survive, why should I care?"

According to Baron Willhem's understanding, Duke Tain knew nothing about the West, despite it being his own territory. The tedious task of ruling a vast territory was always left to others, while he himself would invest here and there, constantly issuing directives to release funds and handle the aftermath.

Not long ago, due to the preparation for a massive investment trade initiated by Duke Tain, everyone in Tainu was worked to death, unable to focus properly on governing the territory. And yet, the Duke leisurely went to the South to initiate another maritime investment, and then returned. Although there was no compensation reaching Willhem's hand for his trouble, he was always troubled because of Duke Tain, and thus, his feelings toward the Duke's family were quite negative.

"What's truly important to him is whether the recent monster outbreak will impact his investment points in the Great Sarain Forest or not. The Cavalry issue is merely something he is bothered with, and he just wants to vent his frustration through me."

Baron Willhem, who had accurately pinpointed Duke Tain's true intentions, angrily crumpled the letter and threw it away.

"They haven't found the culprits yet, but once found, they will certainly deal with them. Tell them that we have dispatched a significant number of mages and knights to protect our investment base," the baron instructed.

"Understood."

The butler picked up the crumpled letter, intending to pen a response on behalf of the baron. As he read, his eyes momentarily paused at one spot. It was where the name of Duke Peletta was written.

"But my Lord," he ventured cautiously, "According to the courier who brought the letter, Duke Peletta, who established this Cavalry, has been declared by the Emperor as the new owner of the Divine Sword. Could that really be true?"

"The Divine Sword Orr?"

Baron Willhem, his voice a low grumble, muttered the name of the sword. He laughed coldly as if dismissing some absurdity.

"Even though I've never set foot outside of Tainu, I've heard plenty about Duke Peletta. How could a man known for his ineptitude and love for pleasure, who is constantly embroiled in imperial scandals, be the owner of the Divine Sword?"

"Then..."

"Obviously, the Emperor made the statement to bolster the imperial prestige. Who would believe such a thing and demand confirmation from Duke Peletta? Would they even show any proof? The Divine Sword isn't something anyone can just touch, its appearance is hardly known."

Whether Duke Peletta was the true owner of the Divine Sword or not, there was nothing to gain from the perspective of the Four Great Dukedoms. Even if Duke Peletta was proven not to be the owner, his reputation would not suffer greatly. On the contrary, if a new owner of the Divine Sword truly emerged from the imperial family, it would increase the Emperor's power and cause headaches.

"Naturally, it's best to ignore such absurdities. Hence, I'm sure the Duke of Tainu wouldn't mention it in his letter. Only ignoramuses like you who still believe in old tales would be swayed by such news."

"Indeed, you are wise, my Lord, even from within Tainu you see the entire continent."

The butler bowed deeply, greatly admiring his master's wisdom. Baron Willhem seemed slightly appeased by his servile attitude.

"It's easy enough to understand if you think about it. Now, what about the Western Mage Union we contacted? I heard they're not being very cooperative with the monster extermination."

"Aren't mages always like that? Unless a monster appears at their doorstep, they consider it none of their business."

"Despicable lot. They don't even know they're living comfortably thanks to others!"

"I've mentioned several times how critical the situation is, but they don't budge. It seems they're still resentful about the incident with our soldiers, hence their stubbornness."

"Still upset about that incident? So now, as the Lord, do I have to side with them? Just because they can use some magic, they act all high and mighty!"

Baron Willhem spat out a curse. He paused, mulling over the issue, before a solution came to mind.

"Alright. Then we'll have to deal with two matters at once."

"What do you mean, my Lord? Please enlighten this fool as well."

"Tell those mage union bastards that we've decided to get help for this extermination from others, so we no longer need the mages. Also, let them know that we've noted their interest in that so-called Magic Spring in the Great Sarain Forest."

The butler was greatly taken aback by the plan. He momentarily fell silent with a worried expression, unusually countering his master's words.

"Will it be alright? Haven't those individuals been staying in the West this whole time to study it? If they find out it's a lie, they will be extremely angry..."

"How foolish indeed. Even if they belatedly realize it's a lie, by then the handling of the monsters in the Great Sarain Forest will be finished. Do they dare to protest against me if they wish to continue their research there? At most, they'll grumble and debate about whether to cooperate, just like they're doing now."

If the Cavalry members truly came, they were bound to encounter the mages who had been researching in the borderlands and Great Sarain Forest at some point. If they misunderstood each other and fought fiercely, from the viewpoint of Baron Willhem, he could sit back and watch without lifting a finger.

'It would be even better if they can help with the monster extermination while they're at it.'

He had no expectations of the Cavalry members. He was also completely unaware that Duke Peletta had already entered the West, not being in the capital currently.

Even if he had known beforehand, the baron's decision wouldn't have significantly changed. Things were going smoothly according to his will.

The mages of the Western Mage Union who had secretly accessed the incorrect information spread by the baron that day were extremely angry as expected, and their leader Micalin Punt, unable to contain his fiery temperament, headed straight to Great Sarain Forest.

Among the mages, there were those like Thais Yulman who only harbored curiosity for the Awakeners, but there were also many who had a sense of caution, fearing that their future positions might be taken away. Micalin was a faction that disliked the Awakeners more than anyone else.

"So, the mage bastards have finally made a move? Everything is going well! We don't even have to use our own forces, and this extermination will more or less be resolved."

Baron Willhem laughed heartily, feeling as if a thorn in his side had been removed. It was a laughter he would not have indulged in if he had known how his trap would unfold.

"I think I can see Great Sarain Forest in the distance."

During a short break, Gakane, who could share his sight with his shadow clone, mumbled with his eyes closed, having sent it out for reconnaissance far in advance.

"I see a forest that looks like green waves from afar. Once we reach the next village, we'll be right there."

"How about the monsters? Do you see any?"

"Not yet... Ah, but I should stop now."

When Kanna asked, Gakane answered and then opened his eyes. The shadow that had disappeared beneath his feet reappeared. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and let out a long sigh.

"Phew, it's not easy distributing my energy."

"Still, you're developing much faster than when you were only in the academy since you're using it constantly in real situations."

Yuder offered words of praise to Gakane, whose eyes were tired.

"You kept it going much longer than yesterday."

"Really? You think so?"

Gakane, whose face brightened as if he hadn't been tired, smiled widely.

"I'm relieved. I feel like I'm pulling my weight. I was really worried before we came here."

Although he was doing his part regardless of what anyone said, he didn't think so himself. Despite appearing cheerful because of his frequent hearty laughs, Yuder knew Gakane had an immense desire for improvement and perseverance within him.

'Once this mission is over, he'll be useful anywhere. Then... maybe I should ask him if he wants to work directly under me.'

Chapter 249

Kishiar's gift of five direct subordinates and the privilege to select collaborators was still intact, unused even once. Until now, the only person Yuder had considered for this role was Enon, but it seemed appropriate now to add Gakane to the list.

'The condition was someone from the Cavalry, not at the level of a Deputy Commander, so there should be no issues.'

More importantly, Gakane's shadow clone ability suited very well with the plan Yuder had vaguely conceived of nurturing subordinates mainly for information gathering. His distinctive appearance was somewhat of an issue, but that seemed manageable.

"Yuder, what are you thinking about so seriously?"

"Nothing, really."

Yuder shook off his thoughts at Kanna's call and turned his head. Just then, Kishiar, who was sitting beside him, lifted his eyes from the note he was writing for Nathan Zuckerman, who was following behind. Their eyes met.

Even with his face half concealed by the cap attached to his cloak, the man's striking beauty couldn't be fully hidden. He gave Yuder a slight, mischievous smile.

'Ah.'

The soft smile, like light peeking gently out from between the clouds for him alone, caused Yuder's heart to sink for a moment without him even realizing why.

However, before he could figure out what that feeling was, Kishiar's smile vanished as quickly as a mirage.

"Prepare to set off again."

"Yes."

No one suspected the exchange of glances between the Commander and his assistant. They mounted their horses. Kishiar tied the note for Nathan to a nearby tree branch, left a symbol only the Knights of Peletta could recognize, and turned around.

"Gakane. Was there anything unusual in the reconnaissance?"

"No."

As Gakane promptly responded, Kishiar nodded.

"That's a relief. It doesn't seem like there has been any unusual surge of monsters in the imperial border yet... From now on, we must rush without rest until we reach the Great Sarain Forest."

They had crossed countless shortcuts to reach the border region, where the Great Sarain Forest was located, within three days. The Misty Wind Horse had displayed its full potential, charging relentlessly even through the swampland where an ordinary horse would have been stuck and died, and through the barren mountains where direction was hard to gauge.

Having come this far, everyone's faces were pale from exhaustion, but they knew the real challenge was yet to begin, so no one complained. They followed Kishiar toward the western border, where the entrance to the Great Sarain Forest began.

"This place is definitely... completely different from before."

The last town before the Great Sarain Forest was bustling with merchants from other countries who had passed through and mercenaries who ventured into any dangerous places. The variety of people was so great that even the Cavalry members riding Misty Wind Horses did not attract attention.

As they headed toward the meeting point arranged with the Knights of Peletta, Priest Lusan looked around anxiously and whispered,

"There are too many armed people. I can smell blood from everywhere..."

"Out of the way! We have to pass!"

Just then, a group of people who appeared from behind Lusan yelled harshly. If Yuder hadn't instinctively pulled Lusan away, he would certainly have been knocked down by them. Without looking back, whether Lusan staggered or not, they hurriedly rode their carriage carrying a person down the alley and disappeared.

"What? Just like that, they left without an apology. Are you alright, Priest?"

"Ah, yes. I suppose it's my fault for letting my guard down. I'm alright. Ha ha... Thank you, Yuder."

"It was nothing."

While Emun was gaping at Lusan, stunned, Yuder recalled the attire of the departed group. At a glance, it was a common, rough robe, but some of them wore pearl brooches on their chests.

'A pearl brooch on a robe that mages usually wear in such a dangerous place.'

There was only one thing that could mean: they were either mages from the Pearl Tower, or they were somehow affiliated with it.

He was curious why they would dash off carrying an injured person, but since they had already disappeared, there was no way to find out. Yuder resumed moving on with his group. Not long after, they once again ran into robed individuals arguing loudly in front of a small house.

"Why can't you do it? I can pay!"

"I told you several times that the priest collapsed from exhaustion. We don't have any holy water or anything!"

"Weren't there other priests? That one, he..."

"He left yesterday because the situation here was too dire. You need to go to a regular doctor, or perhaps a village nearby."

"This can't be happening..."

Despair settled over the faces of the dismayed group. Watching their despair, Kishiar paused and turned to look at Priest Lusan.

"They seem to be in quite a rush. Priest Lusan, shall we go over?"

"Yes, yes. Of course."

Despite them almost knocking him over earlier, Lusan agreed without hesitation. Seeing this, Kishiar, who seemed to have expected as much, instructed Gakane to accompany him.

"Gakane, go with him."

"Understood."

They approached the individuals who were discussing something in front of the closed house, with the injured person lying between them.

"Um, excuse me..."

"Don't bother us. Just move along. This isn't a show!"

Lusan flinched at the angry response, so Gakane stepped forward in his stead.

"This man is a priest of the Sun God. He came over because he was worried about your injured friend. You're all overreacting."

At that, everyone turned to look at them.

"And you expect us to believe that now? Even the priest we had ran away. What a lie..."

The rude speaker, upon locking eyes with Gakane whose youthful appearance exuded an undeniable aura of trustworthiness, stopped midsentence.

"..."

For a moment, their anger was replaced with shock. Then they saw the young priest beside Gakane, the aged holy emblem around his neck, and they all let out a cry in unison.

"No way, are you really a priest?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"By God! I will believe again! Please, check on him!"

"Ah, alright. First, could you tell me how he got injured..."

The robed figures hurriedly escorted Lusan to the injured man, each explaining in a rush.

"We are mages affiliated with the Western Mage Union under the Pearl Tower...!"

"The research facility in the Great Sarain Forest...! Suddenly, monsters...!"

"The array we had set up is acting strangely and collapsing...!"

The voices overlapped making it hard to discern exactly what was being said, but Yuder could hazard a guess. He looked at Kishiar who was watching the situation with interest and muttered.

"It seems like monsters are appearing in this vicinity."

"Yes, it appears so."

Because of the mages crying out that there wasn't even time to move, Lusan immediately knelt down where he stood and used his divine power to heal the wounded person who was laid down. The wounded man had severely crushed limbs, and his forehead, swathed in a bandage, was soaked in blood. As Lusan poured out white light without restraint until the man's pallor improved and his breath steadied, the mages collectively expressed their admiration.

"Wow. This is the first time I've seen a priest using such powerful divine power right in front of me..."

"Could he be a senior-level priest?"

"No, why would such a person come here?"

"Um... perhaps he's been sent as support from Tainu...?"

"Ah...."

As the mages' opinions diverged, Lusan finished the treatment and rose from his spot.

"I've put out the immediate fire. The broken limbs have all been healed, so if you rest him at a general ward, he should be able to regain his strength."

"Thank you so much, priest. I don't know how I can repay this favor... I apologize for my earlier rudeness."

"No problem. But has the situation in Great Sarain Forest become that dangerous?"

At Lusan's question, the mages blinked and looked at each other before responding.

"Of course it's dangerous. Didn't you know that when you came? Aren't you a priest from Tainu?"

"Ah, I knew about it... but I didn't come from there."

At Lusan's awkward reply, the mages' eyes widened in surprise.

"Then why on earth did you come to this dangerous place? If you came with the intention of passing through the forest, we would advise against it. We tell you this for your own good, no matter how strong you are, if you go there now, you really might die."

"That's right. If we didn't have a purpose, we wouldn't want to go back in there either. The situation this year is too different from the previous ones, and it's difficult to deal with the creatures that keep appearing, which we've never seen before. We've seen veteran mercenaries go into Great Sarain Forest and come out dead several times already."

"It's just a rumor among the merchants, but there's even talk that a curse has been laid on Great Sarain Forest. That says it all!"

"Ah... I see."

Lusan, who had been listening to the steady stream of talk, looked in the direction of Kishiar and Yuder with a troubled expression. The mages, as if only just realizing there were other people present, looked surprised and became cautious.

"Who are you?"

"We're with the priest."

After checking that Kishiar and Ejain had their caps well pulled down, Yuder stepped forward.

"We were planning to head straight to our destination once the treatment was finished... but could you tell us more about the situation in Great Sarain Forest if it's not too much trouble?"

"You're with him? Where are you from?"

"We're a group of knights and mercenaries dispatched with a mission to enter Great Sarain Forest."

"Knights and mercenaries?"

The mages, their faces a mix of suspicion and curiosity, scanned the faces of everyone present. Their gaze ultimately rested on Gakane.

"So, you must be the knight then. The leader?"

"...Haha, yes."

Gakane awkwardly acknowledged, having caught Yuder's cue.

"Alright then. Follow us. You saved our colleague's life, so the least we can do is offer some assistance. We'll invite you to where we're staying for a moment."

The place the mages had directed them to was an old building erected at the edge of the forest that extended from the Great Sarain Forest, visible right at the proximate distance.

"This place is merely a temporary facility for resupply, not much to look at. But please, do come in."

As the mages entered with the injured carried on a stretcher, a few others inside hastily rose and rushed towards them.

"What happened? Did you meet the priest?"

"Is the holy water still there?"

"And who are these people?"

Despite their disheveled appearances, as if they had run here in the midst of a battle, their concern for their comrades seemed sincere. The mages who came with the injured on the stretcher looked at the Cavalry members with bright faces as they moved the stretcher toward the bed.

"The old priest was exhausted and had no strength left, the young priest ran away, and they even said there was no holy water left. I thought a real disaster was upon us. But then, these folks happened to pass by and helped."

"What?"

"That man over there turned out to be a very capable priest."

The mages breathed a sigh of relief at the news that Lusan had quickly healed their injured comrade, and moreover, had asked for no recompense. They dropped their guards and bowed their heads to express their gratitude.

"Good heavens, thank you so much, priest!"

"You used such great power to save a dying man, how can you not accept anything in return? Please bill us, the Mage Union, whatever the cost! We are not stingy about such matters!"

"No, no... I am simply glad that I was able to help where needed. The divine power is a gift for helping others, how could I accept a fee for it."

Having been cooped up for a long time in the temple without the opportunity to use his divine power, only enduring oppression, Lusan was deeply moved by the direct and passionate gratitude. As he waved his hand to say it was okay, the mages opened their mouths in astonishment.

"No way... I thought only priests who heal minor wounds while charging exorbitant fees existed, how can there be someone like this..."

"I'm going to start going to the temple again from today. I will be a sprout of God once again, so don't try to stop me."

"What? How can you do such a thing after becoming a mage? I'll be the first one to go repent, so let's not meet in the same temple."

"Everyone, be quiet! The priest came here because he needs to go to the Great Sarain Forest and wanted to know how the situation changed rapidly."

The mages are generally talkative, but the situation was even more serious now that their comrade, who was near death, had been revived. After laying the injured on the bed and checking his condition, it wasn't until one mage raised her voice that they finally kept quiet.

"I'm sorry, we've been fighting monsters since this morning and just managed to escape, so everyone's still quite excited. Anyway... the injured need to rest quietly, so it would be better if we go elsewhere to talk. Please follow me."

With a tired face, she opened the door and led them to a larger space. Several mages naturally followed, standing around as if to guard the perimeter.

"My name is Lorna Beit. I've been a mage in the Western Mage Union for 15 years now. I'm the most experienced person here, so would it be okay if I represented everyone and explained the situation?"

"Of course."

As Gakane responded, the mage who had introduced herself as Lorna smiled.

"As I mentioned earlier, our Western Mage Union has been conducting research in the Great Sarain Forest for several years, so we are familiar with its dangers. Not once has our heavily fortified research base suffered from monster attacks. Well, not until this year."

"Is the situation that serious?"

Hearing the question, Lorna's expression grew grave.

"I'm not sure if you're aware, but over a month ago, reports of heavy damage began to emerge from the countries adjacent to the Great Sarain Forest. Even then, we thought lightly of it. We assumed those countries, with their unstable politics, were ill-prepared and suffered damage as a result, but we would be fine."

There were still a few months left before the monster outbreak period, during which monsters would invade the empire en masse, according to past records. The mages anticipated that, as in previous years, they would be safe if they culled the surrounding monsters before the most dangerous period arrived.

"However, reports of sightings of unprecedented monsters started coming in from the Great Sarain Forest region within the Empire a short while ago. As rumors spread, the land trade routes began to destabilize. The border lords, facing a crisis, requested support from the Tainu lord, the ruler of the largest city in the west. But, there were problems on that end as well."

The Baron of Tainu, Willhem, was notoriously stingy. Despite knowing that he had to deploy forces for monster culling every year in the west - a region with frequent monster outbreaks - he was reluctant to offer his troops. Hence, he forced the Western Mage Union to assist, but the mages, who didn't have a good relationship with him, were equally reluctant.

"The lord of Tainu had been using the power of the Western Mage Union at his discretion in exchange for allowing us to conduct research in the forest. We were all angry, for we were collaborators, not subordinates, yet for years we were made to cull monsters in their place."

The mages had decided that this year they would give the Lord of Tainu a taste of his own medicine. As they squabbled and sought help from their respective homes and the Pearl Tower, the number of monsters appearing at the border regions swelled rapidly.

"As we were busy dealing with Tainu's lord, and ordinary citizens fled due to increasing casualties in the forest, the monster numbers grew. Our leader was so angry that he left Tainu's base and came here."

"I see."

"And then this morning, it all blew up."

Monsters suddenly appeared in the heavily fortified base of the Western Mage Union, which was protected by over a hundred large barriers. After several hours of battle, the monsters were defeated, but many barriers were destroyed, parts of the buildings crumbled, and many mages were injured.

"Fortunately, there were no fatalities... but the condition of the colleague that the priest treated earlier was very serious. That's why we rushed to this village where two priests were stationed... Yes, that's how the situation unfolded."

Lorna's tale, even for Yuder who already experienced the situation of the Western Monster Subjugation in his previous life and knew what was to come, was immensely intriguing. The long-standing conflict between the Western Mage Union and the Lord of Tainu had affected the initiation of the subjugation mission. It was information he could never have known if he hadn't come here.

'Back then, I thought everyone was simply protective of the Cavalry...but there was already discord amongst them.'

"Actually, the reason we initially thought you were a priest from Tainu is because of that," Lorna confessed, with a laugh that echoed through her nose, as if finding her own words amusing. "We thought the Lord had finally realized the seriousness of the situation and started sending support."

"It's unlikely that miser would ever do so!"

She once again expressed her gratitude towards Lusan.

"It really was a blessing that you came when you did. They probably had a good laugh at our expense as soon as they heard the news."

"So, do you plan to simply heal the victims in the Western Mage Union and leave?"

The one asking the question was not Gakane, but Kishiar who had been quietly listening from behind. His voice was unexpectedly pleasant; it was so deep that it made him appear more imposing, especially with his face hidden under his hat. This fact surprised some of the mages, who gave him a fresh look.

"Hmm, that's still under discussion. But I think we probably won't leave completely. There are many who can't leave their research bases... above all, our leader is vehemently opposed to it."

"Even if it becomes more dangerous than it is today, you still plan to stay?"

"If we were going to back down because of danger, we wouldn't have come here in the first place. We mages are like that. We are a species more concerned with finding the answers to the future than with the immediate dangers."

Lorna bowed her head slightly and gave a small smile at the corner of her lips.

"Are you worried about us by any chance? We're more concerned about you. Are you still planning on going to the forest after hearing all this?"

"Yes, we have to go."

"That's serious. After receiving such great help, it's only right that we should help in return...but we're short-handed ourselves at the moment."

Even experienced traders and mercenaries who frequented the Great Sarain Forest suffered substantial damages in just a few days due to unpredictable monster appearances. Lorna wondered what kind of purpose drove those who insisted on advancing in spite of the dangers that even the mages who had lived there for years couldn't avoid. Yet, out of respect for their benefactor, she swallowed her curiosity.

"You don't have to help us."

"No, we can't just do nothing..."

Lost in thought, Lorna suddenly turned her head and made a suggestion.

"Hmm... Some of us are planning on returning to the base soon, would you mind accompanying us at least that far? The place where our base is located is still probably the safest."