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"I appreciate your offer... Can I have a moment to think it over?"

Gakane couldn't outrightly reject the mages' goodwill, nor was it his place to independently make a decision about such a critical matter. He slightly bowed his head, his face displaying polite consideration. Kishiar gave a small nod, seemingly applauding his judiciousness.

"Yes, of course. It's not like we're expecting to leave immediately. Please consult with the others and then give us your answer. We will step outside for a while."

One by one, the mages exited the room, allowing the Cavalry members to freely discuss amongst themselves. Just before Lorna, the last one to leave, could step out, Yuder approached her and spoke softly, lowering his voice.

"May I ask you something quickly?"

"Oh, yes. What is it?"

Lorna seemed surprised, blinking in response to Yuder, who had been silent up till now, initiating the conversation.

"I recalled hearing about the Western Mage Union from another mage I knew when you mentioned it. Might I know the name of your leader who is here...?"

"Ah... It's Micalin Punt. Despite being recommended for a senior position in the Pearl Tower, he chose to stay with this secluded union, prioritizing his research. He is a great mage."

Perhaps Yuder's mentioning of having heard about them previously sparked some goodwill, for Lorna's expression noticeably softened.

'As I thought.'

Ever since they introduced themselves as the Western Mage Union and mentioned their leader, Yuder had been vaguely recalling a letter given to him by Thais Yulman. Now that he had heard the name Micalin, he was certain. These were the very people Thais Yulman had mentioned.

'I didn't expect to encounter them so soon. I thought I wouldn't meet them until at least the second dispatch troop arrived, and we'd officially started the subjugation.'

Though unexpected, an early meeting wasn't a bad thing. Especially in these circumstances. He narrowed his eyes slightly before breaking into a smile.

"...Yes, hearing the name has jogged my memory. The person who told me about him also said he was a great man."

"Did they?"

Yuder replied cheerfully, unaware that his unexpected smile had melted the last wall in the mage's heart, a woman who seemed to know nothing of the word 'smile'.

"It seems like fate that we would meet in such a place. Thank you for your answer."

"Not at all. We should... see you later."

With an unexpectedly gentle demeanor, a stark contrast to their initial encounter, Lorna exited the room and closed the door. As the loud voices and rustling of the mages gradually distanced, the Cavalry members, who had been maintaining silence, collectively released their pent-up breaths.

"Phew."

"Yuder, what did you ask her?"

Kanna, who had been standing next to Yuder, took off her crumpled hat and asked.

"The name of the Western Mage Union's leader."

"Why?"

"Before we came here, Mr. Yulman wrote a letter to him."

After replying succinctly, Yuder turned towards Kishiar.

"Commander, what do you think about their proposal just now?"

Considering the Pelleta knights and Ejain's attendants who were following at a distance, the prospect of joining with the mages could be troublesome. However, it was also true that their familiarity with the geography would likely ensure Ejain's safety during their journey.

Regardless of the decision, Yuder planned to meet Micalin Punt and deliver the letter given by Thais Yulman. Whether this would occur before or after Ejain's departure, depended on Kishiar's decision, so he asked.

However, Kishiar, as usual, did not answer straight away. He silently gazed at him. Despite his eyes being obscured by the cloth that hung down to his nose, the sensation of his gaze was surprisingly clear.

"...Commander?"

Upon calling him again, Kishiar finally turned his head slightly towards the other members.

"Well, it seems both options have their merits. Any opinions?"

"I will follow the Commander's opinion."

"Me too."

All members except Yuder and Priest Lusan said they would follow Kishiar's words. Even Prince Ejain, after a moment's silence and consideration, answered, "I think it would be alright to go with the mages."

"To meet those who entered the Great Sarain Forest to accompany me, we must travel the trade route inside the forest leading to Hisnu. It seems to me, aiming for safety at least until the halfway point would make things more comfortable for everyone."

"I see. Then Yuder, what's your opinion?"

Turning back towards Yuder, Kishiar appeared calm and relaxed as usual. Comforted, Yuder voiced the argument he had wanted to make since earlier.

"I believe it would certainly be advantageous for us to accompany the mages."

"Certainty, not an opinion. Why?"

"Because of this letter."

Yuder took out the letter given by Thais Yulman from his pocket and briefly showed it.

"It is a letter of introduction given by Yulman out of worry for our first external mission as the Cavalry. He wrote it to Micalin Punt, the leader of the Western Mage Union, who is said to be here. They've been acquainted for some time."

Their team, being the first dispatched group, had to join the second team as soon as they completed escorting Prince Ejain. To carry out the subsequent mission successfully, a cooperative relationship with the established powers in the West was essential.

Building a relationship with the Western Mage Union would be a good start.

"...I see. The sooner we build a bridge of cooperation for the future, the better."

Kishiar's voice lightened, as if he immediately grasped Yuder's intention.

"Alright. Let's do that, and as soon as we step out, we need to make sure they understand that we are the Cavalry."

"How should we address Commander and the Prince?"

At Yuder's question, Kishiar paused in thought.

"For the sake of the mission's security, it's better to keep both identities secret. Once we disclose we are the Cavalry, Kanna Wand and Yuder Aile will take on the role of the representative."

"Understood."

Gakane, finally released from his representative role, seemed relieved and his complexion brightened. In contrast, Kanna seemed to feel the pressure, tightly closing her lips, but she knew this was one of the things she had to get used to as the Deputy Commander.

They had made their decision and stepped out of the room. The clamorous voices of the mages resounded from the area they had initially entered, filtering through without obstruction.

"...So that's what Master Micalin said. We should leave a few people here to monitor and report as soon as that Cavalry or whatever they are comes here, serving also as caregivers in rotation..."

"No matter how many times I think about it, I really don't understand. How can the Awakeners have nothing to prey on but what others have been working on for years? Do they even know what it is..."

Suddenly, as if by agreement, the entire party came to a halt. Questions and confusion lingered in the eyes meeting each other.

"What is this all about?"

A moment later, Hinn Eldore murmured with a chill.

"Did I hear wrong? Something about Cavalry."

"It doesn't seem like we misheard. I heard it too."

After Gakane responded, silence once again shrouded the group. Yuder noticed Kishiar's lips, hidden under his hat, curling upwards into a discernible smirk.

"We should probably find out what's going on before revealing our identities."

They entered the place where the mages were. Seeing the faces of the welcome guests, the mages greeted them with bright faces.

"Have you made a decision?"

"Yes. But just before we came in, it seemed like you were in the middle of an unusual conversation..."

As Yuder trailed off and looked at the mages, they all stiffened, looking startled.

"Oh, you heard that? Don't worry too much about it."

"It's a story that has nothing to do with you. It's about some vee-ery nasty people who are targeting us."

"Yes, because it's related to what we're studying."

'Sorry, but it seems like those vee-ery nasty people are us standing right in front of you.' Yuder swallowed a response he couldn't give and slowly asked again.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand how it's related to your research subject. What does your research subject have to do with the Awakener group, the Cavalry?"

"Huh? You know about the Cavalry as well. Ah, it makes sense. They've been quite notorious recently... That's the thing..."

"Hmm. How should I say it? Is it a problem of appropriateness?"

"No, that's not it."

"Then what? Cut-ins?"

Amidst the sudden clamor of the mages, Lorna Beit, the only one Yuder recognized by name, stood up and let out a large sigh.

"That has a lot to do with why our leader came here, as I mentioned earlier. I didn't mention it because I thought it wouldn't be related to the current situation in Great Sarain Forest..."

Unaware of their true identities standing in front of her, she proceeded to explain briefly.

The incident in which Baron Willhem refused the assistance of the Western Mage Union and announced that he would cooperate with the newly requested Cavalry, credible rumors that the Cavalry showed great interest in the research subjects of the mages located in Great Sarain Forest, and the incident where the leader Micalin, who had devoted his life to research for many years, rushed to Great Sarain Forest in rage like a wildfire. As this all unfolded rapidly, the members of the Cavalry couldn't keep their mouths shut.

"...So, our leader currently refuses to leave Great Sarain Forest and has instructed us to instead track and collect information about the Cavalry on his behalf. Of course, it's not me but a few colleagues who will stay here who should do it."

"...I see."

It was too absurd to comprehend what response would be appropriate. Yuder pondered if anything similar had happened in his past life and concluded that it might have been possible. If the tension between Baron Willhem and the Western Mage Union still existed much later than the present time, such a scenario could have occurred.

'It's strange how their attitude changed when the Cavalry was mentioned, and it's led to this.'

"Have you considered that those rumors might be false?"

"Hmm... It could be, but without the Cavalry clarifying it personally, do we have to think so positively about them from the start? We've also done our fair share of investigations and it's true that the Tain household requested their assistance."

Lorna replied with a crinkle of her nose.

'So, they know we've been asked to help, but it seems they're not aware we decided to operate independently after rejecting it.'

The misunderstanding was serious. Yuder felt an urgent need to rectify this situation before it became irreversible, so he threw another question.

"Even so, how would the Cavalry know about and be interested in what the Western Mage Union is researching?"

"Baron Willhem and the Tain family must have told them. They are aware of the Magic Spring Ruins, after all."

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The Magic Spring Ruins. Yuder mulled over the unfamiliar name for a moment, then quietly recalled his memories.

'What were they researching? Were there such ruins in the Great Sarain Forest?'

The Great Sarain Forest, known for its mysterious vitality, had long been believed by many to be a place where ancient treasures could surface if one were to dig beneath it. Countless individuals, too many to name, had wasted their lives excavating near the Great Sarain Forest, dedicating their existence to the pursuit, and would likely continue to do so in the future. Yet, as far as Yuder knew, no one had ever truly found anything of substantial value.

'I don't recall hearing about mages conducting research there after the Western Monster Suppression... and the collapse of the Pearl Tower... Hmm.'

Perhaps their research had ended with the Western Monster Suppression in his past life? Yuder thought and then glanced at Kishiar. As if waiting for that very moment, he opened his mouth to pose a question to Lorna.

"I'm not familiar with these ruins, but the name 'Magic Spring' seems rather familiar. Did you perhaps take the name from the legend of the Magic Spring related to the Archmage Luma?"

"It was indeed derived from that, but that's not all there is to it."

Lorna's eyes suddenly sparkled, perhaps because the topic was related to her research.

"Our Western Mage Union believes that these ruins might indeed be the Magic Spring. You probably wouldn't understand how monumental this is for us mages."

"... Hmm. I see."

Yuder's reaction seemed quite cool, causing another mage to clench his fist and raise his voice.

"Of course, many claim it's a wild fantasy. Baron Willhem and even our headquarters at the Pearl Tower have expressed skepticism about the years-long, large-scale research without any significant findings. But this year, something will definitely emerge! It's a critical time."

With that, the surrounding mages began to chime in one by one.

"That's right. I truly have a feeling about this year! The magic energy levels in that land have changed so drastically, there can't possibly be nothing there."

"We can't let those who are showing interest now snatch it away from us!"

The more he heard, the less reason Yuder could see for the Cavalry to be interested in their ruins, yet they seemed fiercely antagonistic, for reasons unclear.

'Even if it's a time when little is known about the Awakener, they should know that the power of the Awakener and the magic used by mages are entirely different.'

While Yuder was wondering whether it was time to reveal that they were Cavalry, Kanna quietly asked Kishiar in a low voice.

"Um, what is this legend of the Magic Spring?"

"It's part of a legend about the magic revolution. A thousand years ago, the first mages, including Archmage Luma, are said to have drunk from the Magic Spring and awakened their magic power for the first time."

"I see... So they're excavating because they think that it might still be there in the Great Sarain Forest?"

"It seems so."

"But why... Why would we be interested in such a place? It doesn't make sense."

Kanna's expression became even more peculiar. The other Cavalry members also seemed to have complicated feelings about being embroiled in such a wild legend and earning the mages' resentment.

And then, as if shattering their thoughts, Kishiar murmured softly.

"Is that really the case?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do not simply think of them as absurd. Consider the legends I've told you along with their words. Does it not sound like a familiar tale?"

'Familiar...? What do... Ah.'

Could it be?

A faint voice from behind caused the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end. Yuder turned his gaze towards the mages, who were still fervently arguing with each other, and quickly racked his brain.

'The Magic Spring that supposedly granted magical abilities to the initial mages. And the Red Stone that empowered the Awakener. Is their unusual caution towards the Awakener and their anger at mere interest in their research due to linking these two?'

"The Red Stone and the Magic Spring... Is that it?"

Whether the quiet whisper that slipped from Yuder's lips was heard or not, a short laugh like the sound of wind followed from behind. That small reaction, exactly the same satisfied laugh often shown when Yuder smoothly understood Kishiar's intent, was more decisive than any other response.

'Previously, Alik had said he did not know whether Luma's magical revolution was real or not.'

Yuder recalled a part of the old story he had once shared with the priest Lusan when Alik, the apprentice of Thais Yulman, had just Awakened. At that time, he had discussed the magical revolution of Luma, saying neither Thais nor himself believed it to be real.

According to this story, Alik and the Western Mage Union would have different views on the magical revolution.

'If the Magic Spring really existed and they found it, my previous life would surely have known.'

However, that had not happened. Therefore, one might conclude that the research of the Western Mage Union either failed or was abandoned. Yet, the idea of linking the legend related to the origin of magic which began in ancient times to the Red Stone was surprisingly novel, something he had never thought of before.

'So there were mages who considered the origins of magic and the Awakener to have started in the same way....'

It was said that the Western Mage Union, unable to produce research results for several years, were now viewed skeptically by the Pearl Tower. However, thinking conversely, it also implied that at the inception of their research, the Pearl Tower had seen some potential there.

What potential had they seen in those ruins?

While observing the mages with these thoughts, Lorna's conversation with the other mages caught Yuder's attention.

"So, when we arrive at the base, we need to help restore the defense line first. While restoring, we may have to alternate on guard duty, but that level of risk is something we must bear..."

Despite the recent near-death encounter with monsters, there wasn't a hint of fear in the eyes of any of the mages. They were filled with an urgent desire to return and continue their research.

'... Would those who don't even fear death have so easily believed their research failed and retreated?'

Could the fact that he knew nothing about them, even during the extermination of the monsters in the West, and even after he took the Commander position, simply be because their research had failed?

When the Pearl Tower collapsed, many of its mages went missing and a significant amount of research data was lost. However, there was something unsettling about attributing everything about them to that event alone.

"Mages... those mages who were in the west during this period... did we have a chance to clash with those affiliated to that region while we were on our suppression mission? I can't remember well..."

As he speculated about the source of this discomfort, observing their postures, a snippet of a long-forgotten memory and thought suddenly surged in Yuder's mind.

'...Could this be related to the incidents that occurred in the western border area before the dispatch of the Cavalry in my previous life?'

In his previous life, the Cavalry was dispatched to the west a few months from now, and due to the delayed response, the situation was already dire. There were a few severe incidents reported almost daily until their deployment, among which some involved the death of mages that were serious enough to be mentioned by Kishiar, if his memory served right.

Yuder tried to recall as much of the dim memory as he could.

'Was it the incident where several border villages were wiped out due to a presumed mass monster outbreak?'

Although there had been numerous villages that had nearly been destroyed due to monsters, what set this incident apart was the significant number of individuals who appeared to be mages among the victims. He recalled Kishiar's cold judgment, that the uproar over who was to blame only served to worsen the already chaotic western situation.

'Not long after that, the Cavalry was dispatched...'

By the time the Cavalry, including Yuder, had arrived in the west, the incident had long been resolved. If those who died back then were mages from the Western Mage Union, it would make sense why Yuder didn't know about them and why their research had been forgotten and lost.

'...'

While it was just speculation, the possibility was indeed there. Suddenly, the faces of the mages who were chattering in front of him started to seem as pale as those of the dead. Suppressing the chill in his stomach, Yuder opened his mouth.

"Excuse me... Can I continue speaking now?"

"Oh yes. I'm sorry... we got carried away with our conversation. Please continue."

Lorna, the absentminded mage, finally noticed the presence of the guests standing before her and apologized as she responded. Yuder glanced at the mages' friendly faces and slowly asked a question.

"If, as you said earlier, the Cavalry appeared before you to clarify the misunderstanding, what would you do? If they claimed that they had no interest in the research of the Western Mage Union and had no connection to Baron Willhem or the Tain family, would you believe them?"

"Why would you say that?"

Sensing something unusual in Yuder's voice, Lorna furrowed her brows. Her gaze swept over Yuder's face anew.

"Didn't you say you were knights and mercenaries?"

"We were dispatched for a mission and couldn't reveal our identities right away. But we don't want our misunderstanding to deepen, so we decided to tell the truth here."

After taking a deep breath, Yuder revealed their identities to the mages, who were staring at him with shocked faces.

"We are the Cavalry you've mentioned."

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"We are that Cavalry."

In the silence that filled the space, countless emotions swirled with each carrying its own shock. Yuder turned his head slightly, giving a brief glance at Kishiar's expression. He had completely understood the misunderstanding the mages were having, and given there seemed to be no prior or future circumstances worth investigating, he thought this to be the appropriate moment to reveal their identities, as Kishiar had originally instructed. Yet, he was not entirely certain.

From beneath his lowered hat, Kishiar, who was looking at Yuder, smiled and subtly nodded as soon as their eyes met. It felt as if Kishiar, from his smooth demeanor, also deemed this to be the right moment to step forward, as if he knew what Yuder was thinking. Yuder turned his head away from those captivating lips he found oddly hard to look away from, and faced the mages again.

"...Ar-are you really claiming you're the Cavalry?"

Lorna, who seemed to have somewhat calmed down from the initial shock, managed to ask after a while.

"Does that mean you knew who we were from the start and approached us...?"

"Why would that be? It was purely a coincidence."

Although they had suspected they were mages based on their attire from the first time they saw them, the assistance they had offered was not calculated. The capability and warmth Priest Lusan showed left no room for doubt, a fact that even the mages seemed unable to refute, as they remained silent.

"We didn't even know until a moment ago that you all were under such a misconception about the Cavalry. If we hadn't been trying to learn about the situation in the Great Sarain Forest, we would have simply assisted you and immediately gone our separate ways."

"..."

The mages' eyes wavered. They wanted to think it was a lie, but there was not the slightest indication of deception in Yuder's calm demeanor.

'Are they really that... Cavalry?'

Everything about them differed from the Cavalry the mages had vaguely imagined up to now. Even the party standing behind Yuder, who must have heard the insults directed at the Cavalry, confused them by not showing any anger.

They had thought the party, looking uniquely diverse, was peculiar, but the reason they didn't question too much when they claimed to be a knight order and mercenaries was because they seemed well-mannered and discerning. Not a single one among them matched the existing rumors of the Cavalry, reputedly comprised mostly of peasants and infamous for their uncouth behavior.

"I-I can't believe it. How can I believe you all are the Cavalry?"

"Would you believe us if we did this?"

Yuder raised a single finger towards a mage who sharply retorted. A moment later, a thin stream of fire and water intertwined in a spiral, shooting upwards from his hand. Several mages gasped, swallowing hard at the sight.

"No... Two elements at the same time...?"

"God. Without any preparation... and so young..."

The sight of him using two elements so effortlessly was practically irrefutable evidence of Yuder being an Awakener. The mages no longer demanded proof. In the place where their recent display of goodwill had partially subsided, a mixture of caution, disappointment, and envy began to fill the room.

Yuder withdrew his power and turned to Lorna, who wore a complex expression, and began to speak.

"The reason I reveal this so openly is because we do not wish to add a new misunderstanding—that we deceived you—to the unnecessary confusion we've already created. You offered your kind proposition earlier to accompany us to the stronghold within the Great Sarain Forest... Is that offer still valid?"

The mages around Lorna glanced at each other. A hesitation on what to do next was palpable. Lorna herself seemed to struggle to answer immediately, maintaining a silence before asking a counter-question.

"Really... If you are the Cavalry, and this is all our misunderstanding, then why on earth have you come all the way here?"

"As we've mentioned, it's because of a mission."

"What kind of mission?"

"We can't go into the details, but..."

"It's related to monster subjugation!"

Kanna interrupted Yuder, who was about to answer vaguely about the secret mission.

'...Kanna?'

Kanna blinked shortly at Yuder and wagged her finger slightly. It was challenging to understand exactly what she intended, but glancing at an empty chair she was lightly touching, he made a rough guess.

'She must have figured something out in the meantime.'

If she inferred information, then her answer would be correct. After all, it wasn't incorrect. Yuder decided to go along with Kanna's statement.

"...Yes, she's right. It's a preliminary investigation related to monster subjugation."

"So, it has something to do with Baron Willhem from the Tain Family..."

"Although we did receive a request for assistance from the Tain Family, the Cavalry officially declined it."

"Huh? But you just said you came here for a mission related to monster subjugation."

"We've determined there is a need to fully understand and assist with the unusual situation in the West, unrelated to the Tain Family."

After saying so, Yuder took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. To rectify the Cavalry's reputation with these skeptical mages, he needed to act more confidently than anyone else.

"The Cavalry only serves the Empire; it's not a place that moves for the interests of a single family."

The mages facing him involuntarily gulped. Initially, they thought this young man, who was less noticeable than his flamboyant colleague, was quite average. But now, they found themselves unable to take their eyes off him. What on earth could they think of the enormous pride and aura emanating from him?

His pale face and dark eyes pulled people in like the unfathomable night sky. They were unaware of the fact that behind the strange fear touching the bottom of their hearts, there was something akin to fascination.

'What is this feeling... as if I'm dealing with a leader...'

'I only thought he looked a bit gloomy... Did he always have that face?'

'Just how old is he? He can't be that young, can he? Or...'

While each was lost in thought, Lorna managed to regain her composure and finally shook her head and spoke.

"...Alright. I understand what you're saying."

"Does that mean you trust us?"

"It's not as if we can verify the truth right here and now."

"Lorna!"

"If the Cavalry really ventured out for the extermination, disregarding the concerns of others and acting solely for the Empire, then we would have no reason to confront them here and now."

Lorna quickly responded to her comrade mage's anxious voice.

"If the monster incident that occurred today were to end today, that would be one thing. But we all anticipated that it would be difficult for us alone to tackle the Great Sarain Forest this year. And one way or another, the fact remains that they've provided us with substantial help."

"Well..."

"I find it hard to believe everything at once, too. However, as a mage, we've learned to think rationally based on the phenomena that occur, so that's what I'm trying to do."

"Right. But still..."

Contrasting emotions filled the mages' faces. The conflict was evident as they grappled between the reality of the non-hostile Cavalry before them and their past perception of the detested imaginary Cavalry.

Just as their minds were in turmoil, Kishiar's voice softly echoed from behind Yuder, as if he was waiting for this very moment.

"It seems you're troubled by the proposition of joining us in the forest. If our misunderstanding can be cleared, that alone would be enough, so you don't need to stick to that proposal. It's a wise decision for the group to avoid the risks and retreat."

"What... what are you saying? Are you suggesting that we, who made the initial proposal, are trying to run away out of fear?"

"We were not contemplating for such reasons!"

Those who felt directly targeted immediately rebutted. The other mages, who had been contemplating, suddenly realized that retreating from here would mean they would be seen as denigrating their benefactors and even rejecting their own proposal, and their expressions became strange.

'Indeed, there's none better than him at changing the atmosphere with just a word... Now, I suppose it's time to bring this out.'

Yuder, secretly admiring, took out the final tool to secure the mages' decision from his pocket.

"As you heard, it's fine if we don't go together. However, would you be able to deliver this letter to your leader, Micalin Punt?"

"What is that?"

Lorna asked, looking at the letter in Yuder's hand.

"It's a letter from the mage who told me about the Western Mage Union and your leader. He asked me to deliver it."

"A mage who told you about us? What are you talking about, Lorna?"

"Did we have a mage who was friendly with the Cavalry?"

Behind Lorna, the mages murmured, but Lorna did not answer easily.

"I intended to give it to your leader when we meet directly... But given the circumstances, delivering it should be enough."

"How do we know if that's true?"

"If you're suspicious, you can confirm it for yourself."

Yuder handed the letter to Lorna. Seeing the name of Thais Yulman written on the surface of the introduction letter, Lorna's eyes widened.

"Thais Yulman... you can't mean one of the Elders of the Pearl Tower, Thais Yulman?"

"What? Thais Yulman?"

"Thais Yulman, the one who was said to have no equal in the field of research on the nature of magic?"

The mages crowded behind Lorna en masse, examining the name written on the surface of the letter. As Lorna opened the letter moments later, the eyes of many converged on her hands.

"This is..."

Silence fell.

It was an undeniable genuine letter. Moreover, anticipating a day like today when the letter might fail to reach Micalin due to the doubts of other mages, Yulman had left numerous traces that only the mages of the Pearl Tower could recognize.

The Cavalry members holding this letter were credible individuals who had provided significant help in his research, and they had embarked on the monster extermination mission with pure intentions. From his request for cooperation and mutual help, the mages read the disguised language of an Elder's veiled threat, which wasn't exactly a threat.

"So, our leader was a junior to a master like him."

"He is receiving help in his research... What exactly is he researching?"

"He would be terribly upset if the extermination mission drags on and causes problems...?"

Being mages themselves, they understood better than anyone the sentiment of not wishing for problems to occur in their research subjects. The young mages silently stared at the Cavalry members, and at Yuder's face, in front of the intimidating letter disguised as a letter of introduction from a senior and daunting Elder.

"...What on earth are you guys..."

There was no one left who had anything more to argue with the Cavalry. They began packing their belongings without a word, moving briskly and efficiently.

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"Nathan! Is that the sign left by the Duke this time?"

Upon hearing the Peletta Knight's question, Nathan Zuckerman lifted his eyes, silently nodding as he folded the piece of paper he held in his hand.

"Yes."

"And there are no peculiarities again?"

"He advises us to follow at a slower pace."

"A slower pace?"

A knight with a grim scar on his face scratched his cheek, lost in thought.

"Is he intending to delay our rendezvous? I hope there hasn't been an incident."

"..."

Instead of answering his question, Nathan placed the folded note in his mouth and swallowed it.

"Ah, of course. If that were the case, you wouldn't be this calm. Haha. I worry too much."

Even though Nathan did not laugh in return, making his demeanor feel rather bleak, the knight, accustomed to his ways, did not take it to heart.

"What is the condition of those in the wagon?"

After disposing of the note completely, Nathan asked, and the knight turned his head to glance at the shabby wagon parked behind them. Although it seemed quiet as if no one was aboard, inside were two attendants of Prince Ejain.

"Same as ever. Neither fighting nor conversing... Utterly silent. It's as if they've given up completely."

"Even so, we must remain vigilant. They could change their demeanor and attempt to escape at any moment. Especially as we are about to enter the Great Sarain Forest."

"I know. But they surely can't be stronger than you, Nathan."

The knight, aware of Nathan Zuckerman being a hidden swordmaster, chuckled and patted his shoulder.

"But Nathan, are you not at all worried about entrusting the Duke to those of the Cavalry alone?"

Nathan, pushing off the hand on his shoulder, slightly furrowed his brow and looked at the knight. Noticing the cold demeanor in Nathan's gaze, the knight quickly lowered his head as if to say he did not doubt his intentions.

"No, it's not that I doubt the Duke's judgment. If the Duke has decided so, then it's undoubtedly the right decision. I merely worry whether these unknown individuals will truly be able to serve him well."

'Serve.'

A single word from the knight suddenly sprang up in Nathan Zuckerman's mind. Although now a significant power within the Peletta Knights and a freeman, there was a time when he was more accustomed to a life serving at the lowest ranks, cleaning someone's shoes. Therefore, he understood better than most what a multitude of meanings could be included in the word 'serve'.

Kishiar was a complex individual who, due to his unique circumstances and secrets, put a complex and thick wall around himself, independent of trusting those around him. There were only a few, including Nathan, to whom he showed even a glimpse of his true feelings.

To him, both the Peletta Knights and the Cavalry members were all just figures of similar weight. He wouldn't differentiate between who was more familiar or comfortable.

'Except for one.'

In Nathan Zuckerman's mind, the image of a man with dark hair and a pale face surfaced. A peculiar man, quiet and cold like an unlit dawn, yet at times, his gaze weathered like that of a veteran who'd crossed the threshold of life and death countless times. It was Yuder Aile.

Kishiar's attitude towards Yuder Aile was somewhat special. So special that, at times, even Nathan found it difficult to grasp his lord's thoughts. At least, Nathan had never seen him show such long and persistent attention toward anyone before.

Nathan could not understand what kind of emotion his lord was feeling towards him, but he was certain of one thing from his observations so far.

There was an odd resemblance between the two. It was hard to explain what exactly was similar. Although they were completely different in appearance, personality, status, life trajectories, and even age, Nathan felt there was a fundamental commonality between them. Who would understand this, though? Even Nathan sometimes found it difficult to understand why he felt this way. However, the weight of this intuition occasionally thumped against his chest so heavily that he could not dismiss it as a mere illusion.

'Yes, for instance....'

What if there was a being who could give the same answer as him, even when they were scattered on different paths? A being that could reach the same conclusion, despite having different beginnings and processes. A powerful sense of homogeneity only those who have walked the same path for a long time could feel, or perhaps something even stronger. The 'resemblance' Nathan felt for them was close to that.

Nathan guessed that Kishiar's deep interest in Yuder Aile, and the reason he enjoyed his company so genuinely, was perhaps because he had realized this.

In that sense, wasn't Yuder Aile the most fitting being to serve their lord?

Other Peletta Knights might not understand what this meant, but to Nathan, who had served Kishiar since childhood, the meaning was very different.

"It's not our concern. As long as one person is there, it's enough."

"One person? Who is it?"

The knight asked curiously, but Nathan turned his head without answering.

"What, you can't tell? Who is it, really?"

"...The backup team in charge of cleaning up the safehouse is coming. The atmosphere doesn't look normal, get ready."

"Huh?"

When the knight turned his head in surprise, something that looked like a dust cloud from a distance too far for the naked eye to see well caught his eye. Shortly after, their companions who had run up in a flash, gasping for breath, jumped off in front of Nathan.

"Nathan, there were intruders in the safehouse."

"Intruders?"

"Yeah, they weren't ordinary skilled ones. There were five of them, two fought us as soon as they entered, and the other three searched the interior without hesitation, dug up the body of the servant buried in the backyard, and just left."

"What are you talking about? They dug up the body and left?"

When the knight with the scar on his side asked in surprise, the exhausted knight thought, 'That's what I said,' and then replied briefly.

"Looks like they had attached a tracking tool to the dead guy. They seemed to have just recovered that and disappeared... I couldn't confirm what it was, where they went, they disappeared too quickly. I'm sorry."

Upon hearing the knight's report, Nathan's eyes narrowed sharply.

"...Tool? Weren't all the belongings on the body checked when it was buried?"

"I've confirmed it. There was nothing suspicious. Not even a trace of magic artifacts."

The knight with the scarred face frowned, shaking his head. Lost in thought for a moment, Nathan quickly came to a conclusion.

"Then they must have used another method. We'll have to check."

"To whom?"

"If the target is the prince of Nelarn, we'll have to ask those who have come from there. So, what's the situation with our injured?"

The newly arrived knights looked at each other's faces and cautiously reported to Nathan, who was immediately checking the next situation.

"Beddy and Jean were slightly injured by a sword. The others are still fine."

"I see. Those who are injured should get treatment right away."

"Understood."

Nathan immediately led the remaining knights toward the carriage. As he swiftly swung the door open, the two servants, their eyes wide with alarm, met his gaze.

"New assassins who followed the trail of your deceased colleague were found in the safehouse they had left. It seems like they used a tool we can't predict for tracking, then took it back. You might know better about such methods. Any ideas?"

"What, what are you talking about? Assassins following the dead Faity..."

"...They might have been carrying a tool with a special scent that only trained individuals can detect."

While the servant named Jenn was shocked and questioning, Melbon quickly responded with a pale face.

"The mother of the Third Prince, the greatest enemy of the Prince, is from the land of Aeril. I've heard that assassins from there possess such technology."

"A tool with a special scent... could it trace even a buried body?"

"They say it takes several days for the scent once buried to disappear, so it might be possible."

"If they left the safehouse directly, it can be assumed that they left to track the Second Prince. Is there a chance that such a tool could be attached to the Second Prince?"

"...There is."

After a moment's grimace of thought, Melbon swallowed hard and widened his eyes.

"There is one thing. A gift that Faity gave to the Prince a few days ago..."

"What is it?"

"A hairband. The prince has a hairband that he always carries with him, a relic from the deceased second queen. He lost it while packing in haste to leave the Empire, and a few days later, Faity returned it, claiming it was mixed in his luggage. This happened just recently."

"I remember that too."

Jenn murmured.

"But Faity, he wouldn't go that far..."

"Well. You went that far, so it's not impossible for Faity."

"What, what did you say, Melbon? You are also..."

"Quiet."

The two servants shivered and closed their mouths at the sharp aura exuded by the Swordmaster, Nathan Zuckerman. Nathan closed the carriage door, turned around, and briefly summarized the situation to the Peletta Knights.

"The situation has become serious, so we'll abandon the previous instructions and move immediately along the fastest route. I'll send a messenger right now, the rest of you prepare."

Turning

Chapter 255

At Nathan's command, the Peletta Knights silently, yet quickly, nodded and commenced to move, vacating their posts with startling efficiency. From within the carriage, the two servants, who had been eavesdropping, failed to hide their mixed emotions and met each other's gaze.

"Assassins from Aeril... The Third Prince seems intent on assassinating Prince Ejain entirely. What in the world will become of me?"

"You're worried about your safety after betraying us, Jenn?"

"Am I not allowed to worry about myself? Dammit. Whether the Prince returns to Nelarn or not, I need to return to my family."

"If you die, consider it paying for your sins. Betrayal from someone who's afraid of that... interesting."

"What was that, aren't you a spy from Durban? Are you really in a position to say that? You're the one who betrayed the Prince most out of all of us...!"

"And that's why I'm calmly waiting for death. What's your problem?"

Jenn, enraged by Melbon's cold, sarcastic comment, breathed heavily with fury. This was the first conversation they had had since being confined in the carriage, and there was no warmth between them befitting allies.

"I've always disliked you, Melbon. Always acting as if you were the only one serving the Prince... Who would have guessed you were so deceitful? If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be in this situation!"

At that moment, sensing the rising tension inside, someone outside knocked on the carriage door. The two servants immediately fell silent, but Jenn's eyes were still full of determination, desperately searching for a way to survive.

'I've been wronged. My crime, even when revealed, is not so grave to warrant death. Wait for death quietly? No, I can't die unjustly like this. Judging by the situation, it seems unlikely that Prince Ejain will set foot on Nelarn's land, so I must seize any opportunity to escape this place.'

While harboring their individual thoughts, the carriage sped on, much faster than before.

From the moment they crossed the boundary of the Great Sarain Forest, everyone felt a change in the air. Wading through the dense undergrowth, where even a path for a single person was barely visible, was more exhausting than anticipated.

The thickly intertwined trees and bushes, enough to block out the sky, were a significant obstacle. Even more problematic was the thick, concentrated scent of vegetation that filled their lungs with each breath.

The scent of a forest that hadn't been maintained for nearly a thousand years was like a swamp composed of odors. Yuder, who grew up in a deep forest, the Eldore siblings with their strong natural instincts, and the mages who had been stubbornly researching in this place for years, could ignore it and continue without any particular discomfort. However, for those who were visiting for the first time, even breathing in the forest was a struggle.

"I feel so light-headed... I thought all plant smells were pleasant, but who knew they could be this overpowering..." Kanna mumbled, clutching the cloth over her nose and mouth as she trailed the mages.

"I feel the same... Even though the mages explained before we came, the reality is worse. It would have been a little better if we could ride horses." Gakane sighed in agreement with her.

No matter how used to the Misty Wind Horse they were, it was impossible to properly run in the vast Great Sarain Forest, a place too difficult for even a single person to traverse. As they prepared to set off, the look in Gakane's eyes became somewhat wistful, perhaps missing the horses they had left behind at the inn they originally intended to visit on Kishiar's order.

"In a situation like this, I'm not sure we can move properly if monsters appear. I feel so dizzy."

"Try to cover your nose and mouth tighter with the cloth... if you feel too ill, let us know... If I invoke the divine power, you may feel a bit better... ugh."

Lusan, who was in the worst condition among the group, muttered with a yellowish, sickly face, leaning on a tree and retching. At this, Emun, who had been walking slumped at his side, also began to gag.

"I'm sorry. I'm a priest, yet if I keep doing this..."

"If you're feeling weak, you can ride on my shadow. The health of the priest is the health of us all."

"No, I can't impose like that... but I appreciate the offer."

The bond among comrades indeed strengthened most during hard times. Yuder watched his struggling companions, then moved closer to Kishiar, who was walking silently ahead, his hat pulled low.

"...Are you still okay?"

Calling Kishiar just 'you' in a situation where they had agreed not to call him a Commander, in case the mages might hear, felt a bit weirder than usual.

"Whether I am or not, surprisingly, I'm just the same as at the start."

There was no need to suspect it as a lie. Despite having been in the Great Sarain Forest for quite some time, there was absolutely no change in Kishiar's stride. As if he had lived in this place since his birth, the man was walking lightly. Under the cloth, he smiled faintly at Yuder and slightly turned his head.

"And you?"

Yuder quickly hid his twitching fingertips by making a fist and lowered his head.

"I'm okay too. As I mentioned earlier, I seem to adapt quickly, maybe because I've lived in the mountains."

"Good to hear. ...Actually, on second thought, it's a bit disappointing."

It seemed strange that Kishiar would say it was good to hear and then suddenly change his words, but the reason was soon revealed.

"If you were struggling, I could have carried you."

"..."

In any situation, Kishiar was always Kishiar. His casual demeanor, even more pronounced than usual, made him seem like someone out for a casual stroll. Yuder looked around and was relieved to find that no one else had heard that audacious statement, then lowered his head again.

"Even if I had struggled with the adjustment, I wouldn't have imposed on you in such a way."

"You've been in my arms before, so why are you being so shy now, all of a sudden."

This time it was truly something the others should not hear. Instead of responding to that, Yuder looked around once again, then raised his voice slightly to change the subject.

"...I'm truly relieved that you seem to be fine, as you say. I'll fall back now. If you feel uncomfortable or sense anything strange, please let me know right away."

Whether he realized that Yuder was intentionally ignoring him and retreating, Kishiar slightly lifted the corners of his mouth more broadly. Yuder slowed his pace, moved aside from the group, and approached Prince Ejain, who was walking a little distance away.

He was someone Yuder needed to be attentive to, for a completely different reason than Kishiar.

"Are you okay?"

"...I've been here before. Thanks to that, I've learned how to endure."

A low voice emerged from beneath a worn hat.

"If you couldn't bear it, you wouldn't have chosen to come here in the first place."

Although the words were comforting, they didn't provide complete reassurance. Perhaps sensing the careful scrutiny of his own expression, Ejain broke the silence after a moment.

"Is he alright?"

He was, of course, referring to Kishiar.

"Yes."

"Truly remarkable. I heard that his health hasn't been well and he had been staying in the North until he finally showed up in the capital a few years ago... Things are completely different from the rumors."

The tail end of the voice, laced with a bitter laugh, cracked with dryness. Yuder didn't know what to respond, and simply continued to move in silence. It seemed Ejain didn't particularly expect an answer, maintaining his silence as well.

The sound of Lusan retching again came from the front, and the young prince started a conversation again.

"...Does he always lead the way?"

"Pardon?"

"I'm talking about him. You asked me to watch, and I have been. I may not know much, but I've noticed that he always takes the front, leaving others behind. I thought it was because he needed to guide the way when riding, but why is he in the most dangerous position now?"

"That's..."

Yuder turned his head in the direction Ejain was looking at. Just as he had said, Kishiar was always near the front of the group. When Nathan was guiding, Kishiar was just behind him, and since the faithful adjutant disappeared, he had not allowed anyone else to stand in front of him.

Typically, higher-ups preferred safer, middle positions where they could see everything, making Ejain's question a reasonable one.

'But that's if he's not Kishiar.'

Without any explicit order from Kishiar, everyone found their place according to his position. Whether he was in front or behind, the members naturally thought that where he stood was his rightful place.

The way Kishiar had been until now had made them trust his intentions.

"They believe that wherever he stands, he will not be in danger."

"Not in danger? Isn't it your job to protect him? Then you should prevent him from taking dangerous positions."

"Well..."

"Is this another thing I will understand over time, like it's not about following power?"

The belief based on power and the belief from what he'd observed thus far was a little different. As Yuder was hesitating to choose his answer, a sudden commotion erupted from the front. The mages who were far ahead started to shout.

"What's happening?"

Turning

Chapter 256

The two of them stopped talking and looked at each other. Kishiar turned around and immediately issued an order.

"Yuder, follow me. We're going to check on the mages. Everyone else stays put and protects one another. The majority of you are not yet acclimated. Leave the guarding to the Hinn and Finn Eldore."

"Understood!"

The mages were within a stone's throw, close enough to reach with a quick sprint. However, letting one's guard down in this dense jungle was not an option. Placing Ejain among the group members, Yuder promptly moved toward the mages with Kishiar. Even as Yuder and Kishiar approached, the mages were engaged in a heated argument.

"We should just move on! By the time we finish arguing, we could have been long gone!"

"Are you mad? We should obviously go back!"

"Go back where? In this situation!"

"...What on earth is going on?"

Upon Yuder's interruption, Lorna turned around and answered with a grimace.

"We discovered something that wasn't there before we arrived. There's a tense standoff between those who want to ignore it and move on, and those who want to go back. What do you think? What does it look like to you?"

Yuder followed her pointing finger, but all he saw were the familiar trees they had been seeing thus far. However, squinting slightly and focusing, he realized there was something else amidst them.

Twisted black lines seemed to be haphazardly drawn between the spaces. A strange crevice.

Yuder's eyes widened in surprise.

'That is...'

It looked like a long black shadow formed naturally by overlapping trees. Yet, to Yuder's eyes, a smoky energy appeared to be emanating from the crevice. It looked as though there was a crack in thin air.

'Impossible... But it seems correct. How can that be here?'

While Yuder was reeling in shock, formulating thoughts quickly, Kishiar, who was studying the phenomenon next to him, finally spoke up, addressing the mages.

"A crack in the air... Is there any possibility that this is a sign of a monster emerging?"

"If that were the case, it should have already appeared. We've been watching, but there's been no change."

"You're right to be concerned."

"Thank you for understanding."

The crevice was thin like a line, but it stretched out over a considerable range. Under normal circumstances, they could have taken another path. But now, the uncertainty of where a monster could emerge caused the mages' dilemma. There was a confrontation between those who did not want to leave the path they perceived as safest and those who thought they should brave the risks and change direction.

Seeing this, Kishiar turned to Yuder, who had been silently observing the crevice.

"You've been observing it for a while. Are you surprised?"

"...Yes. A little."

To others, his face would not have betrayed even a hint of surprise, but it seemed he couldn't hide it from Kishiar. Yuder readily admitted his astonishment.

"I've noticed you often see things differently than others. Do you see something strange?"

"No, it's not that I see something different..."

As Yuder started to answer but trailed off, Kishiar gently pressed him.

"If there is something concerning, speak freely. Anything will do."

It was challenging to hide anything before him. Yuder finally averted his gaze from the crack he had been staring at for quite some time. After a long ponder, he barely managed to find the words to describe it.

"To me, that... it appears more than simply ominous. It feels like... the starting point of a disaster."

Yes, the starting point of a disaster. Yuder thought it a fitting name for the crack that had just left his lips. There was only one thing he could speculate about the nature of the crevice. An event from the

future he never thought he would see again in this 'present' timeline. It was a phenomenon related to disaster.

"It sounds quite poetic."

Kishiar let out a small chuckle, seemingly amused by the abstract metaphor that was quite different from his usual blandness, but Yuder didn't return the smile. It was not a poetic metaphor, he was speaking the literal truth.

That ominous crack was, in a manner of speaking, a signal.

In his past life, among the disasters that struck the entire continent, phenomena resembling natural calamities often started after such a crack was discovered. Yuder had personally met those who witnessed similar cracks at the starting point of the first recorded earthquake in the soYudern part of the Empire, in the skies above regions that caused abnormal weather, and on the ground just before a massive swarm of monsters poured out. He had even seen one himself.

The image of the crack from that memory and the one he was seeing now was astonishingly identical.

"..."

Memories from the past swirled ominously within Yuder. All the things that had descended from the start of that, the times when he was alone searching for answers, and the moment when he was finally standing under the gallows, briefly brushed past his mind.

Just as Yuder's eyes darkened, Kishiar opened his mouth as if he had been waiting for that moment.

"But it seems to be a fitting name. The starting point of a disaster... Maybe that strange crack has some connection with the excessively fast occurrence of monster incidents in the western region these days."

In that instant, the dark memories flooding Yuder's mind abruptly stopped.

"Do you think so?"

"It doesn't look like a good phenomenon since even you felt it as ominous, and it's a decent hypothesis, isn't it?"

Every time he heard his argument, Yuder recalled the nobles who ignored their own circumstances, those who held power, and the rulers.

'Aren't you just overthinking everything? You're not about to spout some doomsday theory, are you?'

'We've heard this talk before. Do the research yourself. You made noise that the continent might be in danger, and now that you're being touted as the best Awakener on the continent, are you trying to become a prophet?'

'You're really insane. At such an important time, you're shirking your crucial mission of suppressing rebels against His Imperial Majesty and leaving? Are you sane, Commander Yudrain? So what about those signs and disasters? What's so important about that? That's just a phenomenon that occurs right before the monsters come out!'

Even when ordinary monsters appeared, they usually tore through similar cracks, but that was, according to the mages, a temporary phenomenon. Only the ones that existed in space for a long time without anything happening were found just before a disaster struck.

Many considered Yuder Aile's desire to unravel that secret as madness. Some whispered behind his back that he was acting as a prophet and challenging the authority of the Emperor.

Except for one man. He was already dead and in his grave at that time, but now he was strangely watching Yuder with a warm expression.

"You look somewhat off. What's the matter this time? Do you sense something strange again?"

"No..."

Yuder turned his head to avoid Kishiar's gaze. He didn't want to reveal his current feelings at all. After several deep breaths, he finally managed to calm down.

'Let's think about the crack.'

Of course, he had never met anyone who had seen such a crack when he had come to the monster subjugation mission to the West in his previous life. The few subjugation events he was involved in were not inside this dense forest but involved killing the large-scale monsters that had already infiltrated the Empire.

But even then, if such a phenomenon had already appeared, the start of the catastrophe on this continent might have been much earlier than Yuder had guessed.

'No. Perhaps, as Kishiar said, the abnormal occurrence of monsters in the west itself was already the first disaster.'

Kishiar had said it was just a hypothesis, but to Yuder, it sounded completely different. A certain certainty seized him in his shiver.

He blinked his eyes and looked straight up at Kishiar.

"The hypothesis you mentioned just now."

"Hmm?"

"I also think it's possible, so it would be better to investigate it in detail."

"Really? Should I call Kanna?"

"No. It might be dangerous, so I will..."

"And you're not in danger?"

Kishiar's voice fell a little when suddenly a thud sound came from not far away. The mages who were still discussing and the Cavalry members who were observing the atmosphere of this place from a distance all looked in one direction.

"There's no doubt this time, a real monster."

As Kishiar mumbled, trees on the opposite side of the crack shook and made a creaking sound as they broke. The forest as a whole screamed as the trees collided with each other, broke, and fell one after another.

"It's a monster! Be careful!"

With a sound like tens of thousands of birds taking flight at once, a being of unknown shape that hadn't been there just a moment ago revealed itself through the gap. It had a grotesque appearance, staggering on two feet with a height that seemed to be about twice that of a human. Each time the scale-like things attached to its entire body vibrated, a terrifying sound like a scream echoed.

This creature was alive and moving, but it clearly had a different appearance from any animal or plant in this world. It was, without a doubt, a monster.

"Huge, it's huge. It looks like the ones I saw in the field guide... What was its name?"

'Maraedon.'

Yuder answered in his heart to a mage who was fumbling and retreating near him and looked around. He could see Kishiar casually reaching for the hilt of his sword revealed from his cloak.

"Do you intend to deal with it using that?"

"That's why I brought it."

"We'll support you."

As they exchanged these words, Lorna yelled, perhaps frustrated by their stillness and refusal to avoid the threat.

"Move back a bit! We will handle the monster with the tool we brought...!"

"It's okay, it's you who should move further back."

"What did you say?"

"It'll be over soon."

The mages pulled out the defensive magic tools they had prepared in advance from their bags, their hearts anxiously burning. However, they never got a chance to use them.

As the monster's enormous mouth, located near its belly, opened wide, Yuder used the power of the wind and earth to move the shattered trees that were scattered nearby and pulled them together.

In the brief moment when it hesitated, about to spit out its body fluids in reaction to the suddenly obstructing trees, a Swordmaster, whose existence nobody had known until now, unsheathed his sword for the first time in front of everyone and sent out an aura.

Turning

Chapter 257

It was a flash of light, ephemeral yet consequential.

"..."

In the brief yet profound silence, the logs gathered by Yuder's power shattered into fragments. The monster that had been standing still behind them also split in two with a strange sound, sliding apart. Black bodily fluids gushed out, soaking the ground, and the dense forest that had been thriving let out a mournful cry.

Then, more trees than those broken by the emerging monster began to tremble and fell with a thud, one after another.

"Aaargh!"

Only then did the mages, who had barely regained their senses, scream. Yuder, without even thinking to dodge the fragments of branches brushing his cheeks, watched this overwhelming spectacle. Unlike when the monster appeared, everything was falling in the opposite direction from where the people were standing, so there was no fear of them getting hurt.

It took a while for the falling trees to finally stop and the dust to settle. Yuder felt a bright light hitting his face after the last tree had fallen, and he raised his hand to shield his eyes and looked up.

'The sun...'

The forest had been so dense that no light could penetrate it, but now a large clearing had formed in a semi-circle around where the monster had stood, and the blocked sunlight was pouring into that area. Everyone was speechless at the sight, too surreal to be the result of a single action.

Yuder turned his head in the neatly cut clearing, large enough to build several houses, and looked towards Kishiar. He was still tightly gripping the handle of the sheathed sword, quietly observing the spectacle he had created.

Yuder felt a tingling sensation throughout his body for the first time, even though he was not the one who had achieved this result. He wondered how Kishiar, who had released the power he had been suppressing all this time, must have felt. He felt a strange regret that he couldn't see the emotions reflected in the red eyes hidden under the hat.

"...Are you okay?"

When he quietly asked, Kishiar finally moved his head a little towards Yuder. The corner of his lips, which had been closed indifferently, slowly rose.

"It's refreshing now that the sun is out."

He had thought that he would naturally adjust and swing the sword, but he was worried that he might have exerted too much power because the result was too tremendous. It was a relief that he seemed okay.

"Wha, wha, what was that just now?"

While the two were looking at each other, the others who had been behind them rushed over and surrounded them. The Cavalry members looked at them with faces full of surprise and admiration, Prince Ejain with a stern expression, and the mages with faces stained with shock and fear, not knowing what to do, looked up at Kishiar.

"Is that also the power of an Awakener? Or perhaps...?"

"Swo, sword..."

"Swo..."

Facing the mages who couldn't dare to utter the word 'Swordmaster', a title held by only a few on this continent, Kishiar smiled.

"I am, a Cavalry member."

'Does he mean he used a sword but he won't reveal his identity yet?'

While the Cavalry members, who had noticed the somewhat ambiguous meaning of the answer, were secretly exchanging glances, the mages seemed to take his words at face value and finally showed a look of relief.

"Ah... Ah, yes. I've heard that among the Awakeners, there are those who possess power that appears like the aura of a Swordmaster."

"Right. There was a rumor about two years ago, wasn't there? A ten-year-old kid split a rock with a tree branch....."

"That's right. I remember that. I thought it was an exaggerated rumor at the time, but seeing today, it might not have been... Ha... ha..."

A smile slowly spread across the faces of the Cavalry members. It was a smile that could only be seen because they knew that the ten-year-old kid from back then was also in the Cavalry.

Yuder also thought of Jimmy, who would be training hard in the capital around this time.

'Jimmy is talented and strong, of course. But... he probably couldn't have achieved this result with a single move.'

There were a few more members who exhibited abilities similar to aura, including Jimmy. However, their inherent sword skills were not yet so impressive, so when they sparred using only pure swordsmanship without using their abilities, they would lose to Yuder.

But the perfect sword draw that Kishiar had just executed.

'...'

After joining the Cavalry, he had hardly seen Kishiar swing a sword, let alone touch one. Unlike divine power or magic, which can be maintained without use, swordsmanship dulls if not practiced. This was true for anyone, but the movement of Kishiar he had just seen was so brilliant and beautiful that it seemed to break such common sense.

Yuder recalled a memory of when Kishiar's hand had touched him, and he had fleetingly thought that it was the hand of a swordsman, which seemed to have done nothing harsh but was actually very firm. What kind of effort had he made in unseen places to maintain that hand, so that he could use it properly when a day like today came?

A chill ran down his neck again.

"Hey. The strange crack from earlier has disappeared!"

One of the mages, who was awkwardly putting away the magic tool he had drawn to attack the monster, suddenly shouted in surprise. Following his outcry, they all turned their heads and realized that the crack that had been floating near the monster had indeed disappeared.

"That's true."

"What happened?"

"We don't need to fight anymore. Let's go while we have the chance!"

"Yuder. What was there? We were in the back and couldn't see anything..."

Yuder briefly explained the crack to Gakane, who asked cautiously.

"Do you know about the crack that appears just before a monster emerges?"

"Um. I've heard of it, but I haven't seen it myself yet."

"Something similar was in front of us."

"Ah. So that's where those monsters came from?"

Gakane's gaze turned towards Kishiar, who had slaughtered the monster in one fell swoop. He seemed curious about the power Kishiar had shown, but he soon turned his gaze away, as it seemed inappropriate to speak out in the presence of Ejain and the mages.

"No. It had nothing to do with that. It was there before we arrived. The mages were discussing whether to ignore it or turn around."

"Can that happen...?"

"It didn't feel good just looking at it. It's gone now, so we'll have to check it out later."

The sense of how strange it was seemed to vaguely dawn on them, and the expressions of the members who were listening to Yuder's words hardened a little.

"We will now quicken our pace and get out of here before more monsters appear! Hurry up and follow!"

They hurriedly followed the mages who were moving ahead, avoiding the corpse of the monster. The party members, who had been retching due to the shock of the event, quietly followed with their faces lost in thought.

Yuder, sticking close behind Kishiar, sneakily glanced at the tip of the sheath of the divine sword, wrapped in his cloak. The sheath, which looked too far from practical use due to its excessive splendor, was covered in cloth to hide it from the eyes of others, but the divine sword was still a divine sword. He felt a more vivid presence from the sword, which had come out of the sheath for the first time in this life after Kishiar became its owner.

"Are you looking at the energy of the sword?"

"Ah... yes."

At Kishiar's question, he felt caught and answered in a small voice, and a low laugh flowed out from between the hat and the cloth. Yuder kept silent for a moment before bringing up the topic of the sword.

"It seems that no one has figured out what it is."

"To the eye, it's just a needlessly flashy cerEmunial sword."

Kishiar jokingly replied in a small voice, as if sharing a secret between the two of them.

"Do you plan to continue using only that?"

"Hmm... if possible, I plan to do so. Both I and this guy need a period of adaptation. Since the control was not as good as expected, I will have to adjust it for a while and take the lead often."

"You will have to explain to the other members."

"Yes. That will be necessary."

Saying so, Kishiar lightly touched the hilt of the sword hanging at his waist.

"By the way, it's been a long time since this guy's energy has spread out vividly enough to be seen. It seems too excited for the first time, so I need to calm it down."

"You talk as if it's alive."

He threw the answer without thinking. But when Kishiar's reply was slower than usual, a strange feeling came over him. Turning his head, Yuder met the red lips that were smiling with a slightly different color than before.

A chill ran down his fingertips.

"...You're joking, right?"

"Strictly speaking, it doesn't talk or move. In that sense, it's not alive."

"Then what is..."

"Ah! Another monster!"

Before he could ask what the meaning of that smile was, another scream erupted from the front. With a short laugh at Yuder's scowling face, Kishiar leisurely stepped forward again.

"From now on, it seems that many monsters will appear, so protect yourself and the weak and fight accordingly. Don't be ashamed to rely on your comrades. I will also move as a member of the party, so as I said before, I leave the overall command to the leaders."

His gaze fell on Kanna and Yuder and then fell away. As Kishiar, who had lightly drawn his sword, moved forward, noise came from another direction as if monsters were appearing. Most of them seemed to be the same type as the monster they had just killed, but occasionally different ones were seen.

"I... I'm finally going to... fight a real monster... What should I do... I'm not good at it yet....."

"Don't be afraid, Emun. Your power is darkness! First, bring the mages and protect them! You seem excessively frightened, it's not good to leave you there. Gakane, I'll need your help too."

"Understood."

"What should I do?"

"Your Highness... firstly, take your sword and guard the surroundings."

Kanna, tightly gripping the trembling wrist of Emun, issued commands without hesitation to him, Gakane, and even Prince Ejain. Yuder followed the Eldore siblings, who were rushing forward with excited faces, with long strides, quietly catching his breath.

"Hinn, Finn."

"Huh?"

"I know you're excited, but what's needed right now comes first."

"..."

"Help Gakane and Emun, move all the mages to the back, then join the fight. This is a good opportunity to improve your teleportation ability."

"...But I want to fight more right now?"

"You can't always do what you want. If you move quickly, even after you've moved all the mages to the back, there will still be monsters left."

"Okay. Got it..."

Though they were a bit disheartened, the Eldore siblings moved quickly as they always did, working together seamlessly. Yuder slipped between their gaps and stood behind Kishiar, who was facing the monsters that screamed so loud, it felt as if the surrounding forest would shake.

Turning

Chapter 258

Before him lay the bodies of a couple of monsters, already brought down and writhing in their death throes. The sight of him blocking the massive strike of a new monster with a thin sword, without being pushed back an inch, was so nonchalant that it bordered on awe-inspiring.

Yuder watched him, stretching out his hand towards the monster that appeared from Kishiar's diagonal blind spot, tearing through space itself.

'Now there.'

As soon as it appeared, the monster sank headfirst into the suddenly softened earth, reaching out its long arms in a floundering panic, its cry resounding like a bird flapping its wings. Unable to resist the monster's frantic struggle, the surrounding trees fell, crumbling with a creaking noise.

"Dodge!"

The cries and screams of people trying to avoid the huge trees falling due to the monster echoed from all around. At about this time, Kishiar, who had been fighting the monster and had just noticed the newly sunken monster, paused to look back at Yuder.

"..."

No words were exchanged, but his intention was clearly felt through the smile he revealed. Yuder continued to scan the surroundings, putting Kishiar, who was slashing at the sunken monster, behind him.

The Eldore siblings rushed towards the mages who were running around in fear, forcibly moving them to a safer rear position. The Cavalry members protected the relocated mages, confronting the monsters that appeared nearby. Some of the courageous mages stayed behind, attacking the monsters with magic tools drawn from their possession, though it didn't seem particularly effective.

'Mages who only use magic tools are probably unable to use attribute magic... Are those who are continuously preparing among them able to use attribute magic?'

In the center, under the protection of their colleagues, a few mages sweated profusely, waving their hands around as faint traces of magic spilled from their fingertips. Seeing one of them struggling to produce a flame after a considerable effort, Yuder unconsciously furrowed his eyebrows.

'Using fire in such a forest. Unless they are certain they can control it, there's a risk it might backfire...'

Shortly after, the monster hit by the hard-earned flame predictably caught fire but didn't die, instead, it thrashed around in a rage.

"Screech!"

"Ah! The fire is spreading to the trees! Quickly, use the water and wind magic tools!"

"What did you say?"

As the trees started to smoke and sway from the fire spread by the rampaging monster, the mages fell into even greater confusion.

"We're out of water, what should we do!"

Despite their strength, even the powerful Finn and Hinn seemed at a loss on how to deal with the fire, their expressions betraying their panic. Sighing, Yuder launched himself towards them, stepping on the wind.

"Step back, please."

Seeing Yuder suddenly appear, stepping on thin air, the mages' eyes widened in surprise. Immediately, he summoned wind to protect them, raising and lowering his hand. Responding to his movement, a stream of water conjured seemingly from thin air assaulted the monster and the burning trees instantly.

"Screeeaam!"

The stream, which normally could have punctured even a rock in an instant, only extinguished the fire when it touched the monster, not inflicting any significant damage and scattered in all directions. It was not an astonishing scene.

'As expected, I can hardly deliver direct damage with my power.'

That was no different from his previous life. Thankfully, he could put out the fire quickly.

With a horrible scream and the smell of burning, amidst the smoke, Yuder drew his sword and powerfully slashed the leg of the monster before him. A rough sensation, like when scratching hard stone, and the intense excitement he hadn't felt in a while exploded in his hand.

The monster's wail tore through his ears. The injured monster swung its arm to crush him like a bug, but Yuder had no intention of obediently receiving its clumsy attack. He deflected the strike and slashed once more at the opposite leg, causing another scream to ring out.

"Aargh!"

The monster toppled over, spewing black fluid, wavering before collapsing to the side. Trees that had been half burnt by the fire collapsed once again. While thinking about how to cut off the writhing monster's breathing, he heard a shout calling for him from behind.

"Yuder!"

"Are you okay?"

The Eldores, who had retreated behind the mages, cut through the smoke and quickly ran toward him like squirrels. Yuder swiftly conveyed his intentions to their worried faces.

"I'm fine. I'll leave the finishing blow to you guys. Deal with it and send the remaining mages back."

"Understood!"

It was comforting to have reliable comrades to depend on. Yuder moved away, listening to the sound of the Eldores eagerly beating the fallen monster into the afterlife, now that they were finally allowed to

fight. The moment he escaped the smoke, he felt an increasing sense of massive presences surrounding him.

'...It seems to be occurring sporadically not only around here but also in distant places. It must have something to do with that crack I saw earlier.'

The peculiar crack that had revealed itself before the disaster. He couldn't shake off the feeling that the monsters appearing rapidly after its disappearance were somehow connected.

'Everyone seems to be managing for now, but they're not defeating the monsters fast enough. We don't know how many more will appear, so we should clean up quickly and move...'

Just then, a bright blue aura flew past above Yuder's head, piercing through something before disappearing.

"Aaargh!"

Following that, a monster about the size of a child fell from a tree, its body torn in half. It looked like it had died the moment it had appeared, with its bat-like wings, attached to its limbs, not fully spread.

"Be careful."

Yuder bowed his head a little, feeling somewhat strange as he turned to Kishiar, who had somehow gotten close to him.

"Thank you."

When Kishiar shook his hand once, the black fluid of the monster dripped from the end of his sword and stained the ground. Despite most of the dead monsters around them likely being his work, he didn't seem out of breath, which made the scene seem unreal.

"Currently, there's no problem handling them, but the speed at which these monsters are appearing is strange. There have been few reports of large monsters appearing in such large numbers in a short time."

"Yes, I was thinking the same."

"That crack that disappeared earlier also bothers me. As you said, there might indeed be a close connection between the crack and this unusual event."

As expected, Kishiar had been observing the surroundings and shared Yuder's thoughts. The fact that he didn't dismiss his words made something deep within his chest resonate strongly once again.

The man, oblivious to what his assistant was feeling, surveyed the crumbling forest around them before quickly making a decision.

"We can't stay in one place, or we'll risk being surrounded. We need to force our way through."

"As soon as a mage is appointed to guide us, I'll cut down the trees to make a path."

"Then, it'll be my job to cut down anyone who blocks our way."

"Will you be alright?"

At Yuder's question, Kishiar wore a peculiar smile beneath his hat.

"Well, I think it's I who should be asking that."

"Pardon?"

"Didn't you avoid mentioning that your powers don't fully work against monsters, because you didn't want to expose a potential weakness?"

Yuder's eyes twitched for a moment. He had thought he was fairly good at fighting without revealing his weaknesses, thanks to the plentiful experiences from his past life, but he hadn't expected his secret to be discovered so soon. The fact that Kishiar had accurately pinpointed and prodded at something that even the Eldore siblings, who had dealt the final blow to the monsters on Yuder's behalf multiple times, seemed to be unaware of was incredibly shocking.

"...How did you figure it out so quickly?"

"I figured there must be a reason why my reckless assistant, who never hesitates to step forward, would yield only when it comes to monsters. I was certain of it when I saw you use water earlier."

"..."

"Indeed, revealing a weakness prematurely is not good. The others still seem unaware, but it would've been better if you'd told me before we entered the forest."

At these words, Kishiar once again swung his sword toward Yuder's back. From the lingering smoke, another scream could be heard, followed by the sound of something hefty splitting and falling. As the trees continued to fall in succession, Yuder realized that Kishiar had poured even more strength into this attack than before.

He wondered if Kishiar was angry, but it was hard to gauge his emotions from just the lips concealed under his thick hat.

"...I apologize. I thought it wasn't necessary to mention such matters."

Yuder made an apology. To him, not revealing his weaknesses was such a natural act that he hadn't even considered mentioning it, but he belatedly realized that Kishiar may have perceived this as intentional.

'Kishiar informed me of his potential weaknesses beforehand, while I did not. Could he have felt suspicious about that?'

Yuder, unusually flustered, added more to his words.

"I didn't intend to make you uncomfortable, Commander. Still, I won't be a hindrance in this mission."

Kishiar, turning to face him, let out a soft sigh.

"I'm not uncomfortable."

An unknown emotion echoed in his low, resonant voice.

"I just thought that being too competent could be a problem as well."

Turning

Chapter 259

What did it mean to say that being too competent could also be a problem? Unlike other times, it was difficult to ask this question outright. However, they were not afforded the leisure of further conversation. From behind, a new scream echoed again, and Kishiar readied his sword once more. A vivid blue energy slid down the silvery sword.

"We have no time now, let's talk later."

As Yuder nodded, Kishiar turned away. But after a few steps, he seemed to remember something and changed his direction, striding back to stand before Yuder.

"..."

There was no time to ask what was happening. From a distance close enough to touch with just one more step, a fleeting red gaze flickered below the horizon.

What was he trying to say? It wasn't the time for standing idly, facing each other like this, but still, he couldn't shatter this brief, peculiar tension that arose.

The screams that had been echoing faded away to a dull hum. The acrid smell, the smoke that made one's eyes sting, and even the senses that had been keenly alert to any sign of monsters—everything relaxed. His senses, which had been widely spread out, all closed, leaving only the man before his eyes.

It was then that Kishiar, with his free hand, reached out to touch Yuder's chin. His thumb moved gently, stroking the skin beneath his cheek. A moment later, he pulled his hand away. His white fingers were smeared with a bit of blood and a dark stain.

'...Is that my blood?'

He hadn't felt any pain, hadn't realized he was injured, but now his skin stung a little. It must have happened while dodging the monster's attack earlier.

"You can't afford to get hurt anymore. Can you promise me that?"

Yuder lifted his gaze from Kishiar's fingers to look at him again.

That strange feeling he'd experienced several times when facing Kishiar returned. An odd heat, ill-fitting for the situation, flowed from his heart to his fingertips and toes, then seemed to creep up to his eyes.

Unable to withstand this unbearable heat, Yuder evaded Kishiar's gaze and voiced his dry agreement.

"...Yes."

Only after the distant-sounding reply flowed out did Kishiar turn away. The slow and quiet world Yuder had been sensing then regained its proper speed.

"Yuder!"

His comrades' voices calling him echoed from afar. Yuder took a deep breath and swiftly moved forward.

Not long after, having cleared all the surrounding monsters and finding a brief respite, the group gathered together to assess their current situation and briefly discuss their next course of action.

"I think we all agree that the frequency of the monster appearances is beyond normal. If we continue like this, we will surely be surrounded. Therefore, we should reduce the time spent dealing with the monsters, cut down the obstructing trees, and move quickly. What do you think?"

The Cavalry quickly agreed with Yuder's proposal, discussed in tandem with Kishiar. However, the mages couldn't shake off their anxious expressions.

"That's true. But how are we to quickly deal with the creatures that could appear from anywhere, and how are we supposed to cut down the trees? Unless we start a fire like before, it will be hard to cut down so many trees while avoiding injuring our own."

"We've almost run out of the offensive magic tools we brought too..."

Yuder listened to the murmuring voices of the concerned mages with a troubled look on his face, before opening his mouth briefly.

"I will handle cutting the trees. All I need is one of you to guide me. There's no need to worry."

"You're saying... you'll do it all by yourself?"

The mages asked with a shocked expression on their faces.

"Yes."

"Are you joking?"

"Yuder isn't one to jest."

"Seems like they still can't believe it even after what they've seen."

The Eldore siblings, who were sitting in the back like overstuffed little beasts, chuckled and whispered to each other. Hearing their words, a mage flinched and stiffened his shoulders. Lorna, her face smeared with soot, stepped forward to speak.

"To be honest... if it had been someone else saying this, I would have told them not to overextend themselves. But after what we just witnessed, I can't help but believe. If it weren't for you, we would have been wiped out earlier."

Her voice was raspy from inhaling smoke during the battle.

"In a situation where our attack magic tools are almost depleted and we can't offer much help, sticking with us is impressive in itself. It speaks volumes about your confidence in your skills."

Her gaze alternated between her worn-out colleagues and the still-vibrant members of the Cavalry. The other mages, having gauged the disparity in their abilities from the recent battle, bowed their heads in defeat.

"Alright. We'll follow your plan. And I'll guide you. But what about the monsters we'll encounter along the way? How do we deal with them quickly? Are you planning to handle that too?"

"Of course not. I will take care of that."

Kishiar, who was standing behind Yuder, slowly raised his hand to interject.

"Leave the monster handling to me. You all just focus on moving."

"So you're the one who killed the most monsters earlier. I didn't realize you still had the energy to step in."

"I have plenty of energy. Do you need proof?"

The mages gaped at his cheerful voice, momentarily forgetting the situation.

'What's with him? We just had a fierce battle, and he acts like he's been out for a leisurely stroll.'

'He was charging around so much earlier, yet he doesn't look winded, and there's not a single speck of grime on him.'

'How come we've never heard of such a powerhouse being in the Cavalry before?'

Amid the flurry of thoughts, Lorna, regaining her composure, nodded her head as if to make a decision.

"No, no proof is needed. We'll follow your plan, then. Let's get moving."

"Understood."

The party reorganized. Yuder and Lorna were at the front, followed by the mages bunched together, and the Cavalry members stood in a protective circle around them.

At the very end stood Kishiar, casually holding his drawn sword.

Yuder, surveying the aftermath of the battle before they set off, asked Lorna a question.

"Is the relic site, your destination, still far from here? Assuming we move in a straight line."

"Not far. If we hadn't been attacked by monsters, we would have arrived by now."

"Understood. Let's move."

Lorna, looking off into the distance of the forest, promptly pointed in one direction.

"The research site is in that direction. The distant white-leaved tree... huh?"

"What's the matter?"

As Lorna asked in an unusual tone, she looked back at Yuder with trembling eyes.

"...I can't see it."

"What?"

"The Western Mage Union made some of the leaves of the trees near the research site change color so only the mages could see them using a special method. They did this to find the research site from anywhere quickly. The thing that was visible just a moment ago... I can't see it now."

Both Lorna and Yuder could immediately guess what this meant.

"Something must have happened."

"My goodness. This has never happened before. How could something like this..."

Yuder immediately turned around. He raised his hand towards the mages and Cavalry members who, like Lorna, seemed to be late in realizing the situation, their faces turning pale.

"Please remain calm, especially in situations like these. Let's get moving. Kanna."

"Yeah, don't worry about this end. I'll follow you well."

To guide the panic-stricken mages without error, the Cavalry members protecting them had to stay even more vigilant. After a silent exchange of looks with Kanna, indicating she was to take up this task, Yuder patted Lorna's shoulder and moved forward without hesitation.

"Let's go."

The research site in the Great Sarain Forest created by the Western Mage Union was in complete chaos, looking like a typhoon had just passed. Shattered remnants of the magic circle, unable to withstand the attacks of numerous monsters, flickered sporadically in many places. Beneath the ruins of the destroyed buildings, the occasional fallen figure was seen.

While Yuder, who had cut down the last tree to get closer to the research site, was scrutinizing the scene with a furrowed brow, Lorna ran ahead, staggering and panting, unable to make a sound.

"Leader! Leader!"

"It's dangerous."

Before Yuder could stop her, a few monsters that had been crouched between the buildings raised their heads sharply.

"Screech!"

However, before the monsters could approach Lorna and Yuder, they were sliced by a light that came flying from behind, and their heads flew off instantly. It was the power of Kishiar, who had arrived a little later with the rest of the group.

"Ah..."

The mages collectively looked around with stunned faces.

"What, what is this..."

"It's not all destroyed! Over there, a building is still standing!"

Ignoring the fallen monsters, Lorna, who had been running, pointed in a direction and yelled. Yuder saw the building she was pointing to. Monsters surrounded it and were attacking, but a defensive barrier flashing around the building was barely holding them off.

Suddenly, a flame burst from inside, blasting a monster's head off. Seeing this, the mages cried out in relief.

"Let's go! We need to help them, quickly!"

Turning

Chapter 260

With their comrades' safety at risk and their patience worn thin, the mages were beyond the point of calm. Before joining the frantic mages, Yuder turned his gaze to Kishiar.

"What should we do?"

"We can't afford to lose the mages who've been with us so far. We need to rescue those still inside first and assess the situation."

"Understood."

Kanna, Emun, whose forte wasn't combat, the Priest Lusan, and Prince Ejein remained behind while everyone else headed towards the battle-ridden building. The sight of numerous monster corpses scattered around the building suggested that those inside were desperately holding their ground.

In the heat of battle, Yuder protected a mage, who was fighting courageously with his remaining offensive magical tools, that was about to be skewered from behind by a new monster by causing the ground beneath the monster to sink about a foot, ensnaring its ankle.

"Roaaar!"

The sudden shift caused the monster to lose balance and wobble backward with a roar, startling the mage who quickly spun around.

"Gah..."

"Dodge to the side."

At Yuder's instruction, the mage rolled to the side just in time for the shadow clone of Gakein to spring forth, as if it had been waiting for this moment, and tear the monster's limbs apart. As black bodily fluids spattered and a tearing scream echoed, Gakein nearby frowned and covered his ears. Close to him, the Elder siblings were swelling their bodies, wrestling with the monsters.

The building, which had been eerily silent for a while, started to fire flames like cannons again, seemingly having realized they were allies. Not long after, all the surrounding monsters that had besieged the building were lying dead on the ground. Despite all of this, the one who claimed most monsters' lives was Kishiar, who hadn't moved much at all.

"Hah... hah..."

"Is... is it over now..."

The battle-worn mages, their surroundings smeared with black fluids, gasped for breath. Shortly after, the tightly shut door of the building swung open, revealing figures that looked just as battered.

A man stood at the forefront, wearing a mage's robe adorned with a pearl brooch. His unkempt, ash-colored beard and eagle-like, yellow eyes conveyed a sense of vigor despite his age.

"Master!"

"You're safe!"

"Good. You all made it back safely too. I regretted telling you to come back sooner... but it seems heaven was on our side."

The man was Micalin Punt, the leader of the Western Mage Union. He comforted the rushing mages with a fatherly pat on their shoulders, radiating the shrewdness expected of a leader who had shouldered a group for a long time.

"What on earth happened? Weren't you recovering the defenses after we left? How did our base get this devastated?"

"A few hours ago, monsters started spawning at an astonishing speed near the ruins. We never thought the number one defensive line that was breached at dawn would be breached again, especially since we hadn't fully recovered it. Who knows what would've happened if you hadn't arrived."

"We're really lucky we weren't too late."

"But... who are these people who helped us?"

The gaze of Micalin and all the mages turned to the Cavalry members standing behind them.

"These are the members of the Cavalry who helped us to get here," said Lorna, speaking on behalf of the group.

Upon hearing her answer, the other mages who had followed Micalin out of the building gasped in unison.

"The Cavalry?"

"You mean the real Cavalry?"

The atmosphere, filled with the joy of mutual survival, froze over in an instant.

'So, it comes to this.'

Even if they had received help just moments ago, the preexisting negative impressions of the Cavalry and the misleading information spread by Baron Willhem would prevail. They would likely not believe immediately. The other Cavalry members also didn't reveal any signs of discomfort or surprise, each seemingly making a similar judgment for their own reasons.

Caught in the middle, uncertain of what to do, were Lorna and the mages who had come with her.

"I understand what you might be thinking. But it's all a misunderstanding."

"True. We were shocked at first too. But once we got to know them, they turned out to be great people!"

"A...misunderstanding?"

"Yes, a misunderstanding!"

"If it weren't for their help, we wouldn't have made it this far, we would be dead. You saw them assisting just now!"

Amid the chaos, the mages following Micalin fell silent and turned their gaze toward their leader. It was up to him to make the final decision. Micalin, who had been quietly observing the Cavalry, finally spoke again.

"Are you really the Cavalry?"

"Yes, we are."

Micalin scanned the figure of Yuder, who had stepped forward to respond.

"You look quite young to be a representative... May I consider you as such?"

Yuder glanced briefly at Kishiar before nodding.

"Yes, I am Yuder Aile, the aide-de-camp."

"I am Micalin Punt, the head of the Western Mage Union. Let's skip further formalities due to the circumstances."

Without a handshake, Micalin concluded the introductions and exhaled deeply.

"Lorna is a trustworthy mage. Since we've received help, it's only right to offer hospitality. Things are quite messy, but come inside for now. We can talk about this misunderstanding later."

They followed Micalin into the building. The moans of the injured echoed around the structure, which was apparently originally intended for research. The sight of the injured visibly darkened Priest Lusan's face.

Without asking for permission, he immediately approached an injured person and knelt down to assess the situation.

"Are you okay?"

"Uh...ugh..."

"The broken area looks severe. Can someone help me? I need to set the bone and use the Divine Power immediately."

His assertiveness surprised the mages. Micalin Punt was no exception.

"You said you are from the Cavalry, but you're a priest...?"

"He is a priest in our group. It seems he intends to start treatment immediately. Could you perhaps assign a few mages to assist him?"

Micalin maintained a strange silence. Taking his expression as doubt, Lorna once again stepped forward to speak.

"Master, there is no need for suspicion. That man is truly a priest of the Sun God. He saved Elvil from the brink of death. If we hadn't happened to meet in the village, and if he hadn't extended his kindness, we might have had to return after burying Elvil's corpse."

"...Elvil?"

"Yes."

Micalin alternated his gaze between Lusan and Yuder. His previously sharp expression finally softened. His eyes, which had been shaking as though filled with human emotions, briefly darted upward to the ceiling before he regained control.

"...Understood.Jean, Roca, Mule. Go help him."

"Ah, understood."

The atmosphere lightened as the mages immediately rushed to assist Lusan. Micalin swiftly repositioned the mages who were following him, instructing them to go outside to handle the situation, leaving only a few mages, including Lorna, by his side. He then turned to face the Cavalry members.

"What a mess. We've been fighting monsters non-stop since yesterday, unable to even catch a wink of sleep. I can't understand where these cursed creatures keep coming from."

Micalin took a big gulp from the cold water that a mage handed to him, and let out a rough sigh as he wiped his mouth. There was deep fatigue swirling above his wrinkled eyes.

"Now, tell me. What misunderstanding did I, Micalin Punt, have about you?"

"Before that, please accept this first."

Yuder offered a letter from Thais Yulman that he had kept hidden. Micalin accepted the letter, saw the name written on the outside, frowned, briefly set it aside, then brought it close to his eyes again.

"...Where are my emergency glasses? Can someone fetch them for me?"

"H-here they are, Sir."

Finally wearing his glasses, Micalin once again scrutinized the letter before carefully opening it to read its contents. The mages, feeling tense at their leader's unusual behavior, focused all their attention on his fingertips.

"...There's no room for doubt. This is truly a letter from Thais."

Mixed emotions were evident in the words that Micalin muttered as he put the letter down after a while.

"You... were really from the Cavalry, weren't you?"

"Yes."

Rather than expressing annoyance as this point had already been clarified several times before, Yuder simply chose to give a brief response, void of any emotional change.

"I see. Thais was conducting some research over there... Can I ask what it was about?"

"I apologize, but I can't disclose that."

"No communication for several years and now I see his name again in a place like this."

A complicated look passed over Micalin's eyes. After a moment, he lowered his eyes and wore a weary smile for the first time.

"That's so like Thais."

Yuder could finally perceive that Micalin Punt, who had been as sharp as an eagle eyeing its prey, had slightly let down his guard. Micalin, who had been quietly looking at the letter, abruptly changed the topic.

"Thais and I share the same mentor, and we're of the same age. But because he entered the Pearl Tower six months ahead of me, he always tormented me. To be honest, the reason I relinquished my position in the council of the Pearl Tower Elders was because I didn't want to face that man."