

Turning 271

Chapter 271

When he first saw it, he was so startled by the magic power gushing out from the crevice that he didn't really focus on it. But as he conversed with Lorna, a fleeting glance towards that spot instilled a strange sensation within him.

"Too dense and dark. Was it like this before?"

While shadows were inherently dark and dense, there was something distinctly different about this one. As he squinted, worried it might be a sign of a crack, Lorna called him in a puzzled voice.

"Sir Aile? You seem to have seen all there is to see. Is there something strange?"

"That shadow in the crevice... Hasn't it become a little strange?"

"Pardon?"

Lorna narrowed her eyes, a look of concentration on her face.

"Um.... Exactly what seems strange? It seems to be the same as before."

"..."

Yuder was unable to answer. Even when asked what was strange, he had no precise words to describe it. Lorna, who had been waiting for an answer, sighed and patted Yuder's shoulder.

"It seems you are excessively worried about a potential crack-related issue. Today isn't the only day. You can come back tomorrow and check again. Let's just go back now."

"Will you be back tomorrow?"

"Of course. I will keep coming here to check as long as I'm fine. I cannot let this place be damaged, even if other places might be."

After packing the co-shared journal of the mages left in the guard post, Lorna closed the protective magic circle that covered the Magic Spring. Yuder stared at the Magic Spring, gradually fading like a mirage, while she struggled to move her magic power.

"Do you always have to open and close the formation to go in there?"

"Yes. If we don't, it might be invaded by others or monsters. But I'm worried, the central control formation has been weakened too much due to damage. I need to repair it soon, but I'm not sure if I have the strength..."

After closing the formation, Lorna claimed that she had almost exhausted the day's accumulated magic power. Since becoming a mage in her childhood and undergoing consistent training for many years, she was one of many mages who struggled to move even a single formation, which was a common occurrence in this world.

'Magic power deficiency.'

Yuder pondered on a problem he had never seriously considered before.

To become a mage, one had to be born with the talent to sense magic power, but among those selected, only a few could cast attribute magic. Even fewer could perform powerful attack or defense magic, and those who could do so received treatment no less than high nobility, regardless of their commoner origins. This was why magic tools, which could use engraved magic with a slight amount of magic power, were increasingly popular.

Yuder had always thought it was natural that the magic the present-day mages could perform was less potent than the miracles said to have been performed by legendary Archmages. After all, legends typically exaggerated reality.

But they sincerely believed they could bridge this gap. Yuder recalled the emotions that flickered across Lorna's face when she smiled, asking him if he had ever undergone a magic power responsiveness test and inundating him with questions about his powers, similar to attribute magic.

'Envy... or perhaps resentment.'

It was a feeling he knew all too well from his previous life, frequently directed at him by others. Despite knowing that magic and the abilities of the Awakeners were different powers, they still envied Yuder.

Lorna had proclaimed that through her research, she would solve the issue of magic power deficiency. If that was indeed the case, what would they gain? No matter how much he pondered, there was only one answer.

'Power.'

The ultimate objective of the research, the one many were willing to stake their lives on, inevitably culminated in power. The strange sensation that this seemed so obvious yet perplexing was because he knew how far humans desiring power could go in recklessness.

Yuder cast a fleeting glance back at the Magic Spring Ruins that he had left behind.

'It should have been Kishiar here, not me.'

If that were the case, Kishiar would have better understood this strange feeling that he had, and would have gained much more information while looking at the Magic Spring. But no matter how much he regretted it, he couldn't change the reality that he was alone.

Yuder put his hand into his pocket. He felt a little relief as he sensed the clinking of the hard, round candies inside. As he slowly fumbled with them, he resumed walking, leaving the ruins behind.

Lorna and Yuder did not encounter any monsters on their return. Lorna reported the results of their expedition to Union Leader Micalin, who gave his consent for Yuder to accompany Lorna to examine the ruins and their surroundings once a day.

Just like the day before, Yuder spent the rest of the day helping the mages. The number of mages watching him work had increased compared to the day before. His guard was noticeably down compared to before, even when mages came right up to him to ask questions.

The day in the Great Sarain Forest ended earlier than elsewhere. Because of the dense trees, it grew dark as soon as the sun began to set. Even after all the mages had gone back, Yuder stayed out for a long time, surveying the surroundings. He alternated between the desire to dash into the seemingly empty forest immediately and the cold logic that he should stay where he was.

"..."

As time passed, the shadows grew longer. Only when they blended into the darkness, becoming indistinguishable, did Yuder move his hand to take out a candy from his pocket. The sweet taste that filled his mouth as he unwrapped the slightly worn paper and put the candy in his mouth was familiar.

'What the heck am I doing?'

There were hardly any times in his life when he had wasted time so aimlessly.

With a shake of his head, Yuder returned to his quarters. He didn't feel like eating dinner, so he decided to skip it. Today, too, Lusan seemed to be sleeping by the side of the injured, for his bed was empty. Yuder sat on the bed and looked outside. He hadn't noticed when he was with the others, but now that he was alone, he felt unusually on edge due to the sound of the wind coming from the darkness.

'It feels as if someone is watching.'

It seemed like it was just his imagination, but he could never be too sure. He kept his sword, usually left by the side of his bed, close to his body and closed his eyes.

Then, an unpleasant dream overwhelmed him.

Someone seized his arm and yanked him back harshly.

At the same time, a giant tail brushed past his face and crashed into the cliff. With a loud bang, a part of the mountain shattered, and screams echoed from all directions. The overpowering smell of blood made him so dizzy that he could barely stand.

Yuder exhaled heavily, glancing sideways. The one who had grabbed his arm, propelling him backward with surprising speed to avoid the monster, opened their lips, his face furrowed in a frown.

"Be careful."

"..."

He didn't bother to ask when they had arrived, nor did he offer thanks for his assistance. The other wouldn't expect such, anyway.

Kishiar, looking paler than usual, released Yuder's arm and scanned him briefly. His gaze lingered a few times on Yuder's dust-covered face and abdomen, grazed and bleeding from an encounter with the monster.

Before Kishiar could comment on his injuries, Yuder forcibly shifted his gaze and asked a question befitting of his Deputy Commander status.

"I've never seen a monster that big before. I can't begin to guess where it came from."

"The first sighting was near Great Sarain Forest."

Kishiar responded quietly.

"They say it wasn't that big then, but it has been growing larger day by day, to the size it is now."

"Can it really grow that much in such a short time?"

"We only know a fraction about monsters. It's possible that some could have such strange growth patterns."

Wasn't the creature before them the most solid evidence of that? Suddenly, the blood on his frowning face caught his eye. It was a fresh wound, likely caused by a sharp spike on the creature's tail as Kishiar pulled Yuder away.

The monster, as large as a small mountain, was bigger and stronger than any monster they had encountered so far on the Cavalry western subjugation mission. Moans of injured members echoed around them, but the number of collapsed piles of stone made it almost impossible to locate them.

A catastrophe. Yuder suddenly thought, gazing up at the bellowing monster that shook the sky.

There would be no reason for such a monster to appear unless the world was on the brink of destruction. If they did not retreat from here, it was likely that all the Cavalry members here would die or suffer equivalent casualties.

They had fought back, trying to squeeze out every ounce of their strength that wasn't directly flowing to topple a mountain, yet the monster, thought to be shattered and dead, rose again, even bigger than before, scattering its massive roar. The landscape of the entire west seemed to be changing at this rate.

In such a situation, what use could Kishiar be, even if he were here? Yuder acknowledged that his power was stronger than it appeared, but such a gigantic creature would be hard for even Kishiar to strike.

It might be too late to retreat now, but if the precious imperial family member were to die here, it would become an even bigger problem. Not that life could get much worse when one was constantly being criticized... Yuder sighed and opened his mouth towards him.

"The situation isn't looking good. Perhaps it would be better for the Commander to withdraw first."

"Are you telling me to leave just after I arrived?"

"Aren't you here to avoid death? In any case, I'll buy some time. Lead the other members and retreat."

Yuder expected him to agree, but there was no response. When he turned his head, he was surprised to read a rare emotion on Kishiar's pale, distorted face as he looked at him.

"I didn't come here to back down."

He could feel a cold flame in his voice.

"You should retreat, Yuder Aile."

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"Step back, Yuder Aile."

Even before hearing his response, Kishiar moved forward. Watching his retreating figure, Yuder's eyes trembled with questions and sharpness. In that moment, he suddenly realized that this situation was a mere memory of the past.

Ah, that was it. This was a memory of a particularly striking day during the tremendous battles fought while subjugating the Western monsters. Unlike the usual monsters that would inevitably die when falling from a great height or being crushed by a collapsing mountain, there was one monster that peculiarly grew larger with each attack it received.

In the future, many had tried to kill this monster, named Pethuamet after the name of a demon, but their efforts yielded little result. Yuder, too, had exerted tremendous effort to kill the creature, almost collapsing an entire mountain in the process, but the monster survived, growing even larger.

Had things remained as they were, he might have failed his mission for the second time, or even died.

Just like the scenery before him, Kishiar appeared.

He was unarmed. His white Commander's uniform was stained with dirt, and his hands, protected only by long gloves, lacked any form of weaponry. Yet, even before the monstrous howl that could knock one unconscious, he stood firm and alone.

In the dream, Yuder clenched his fists, readying for battle at any moment, and frowned deeply as he observed the scene. Up until then, Yuder had assumed that even if it were Kishiar, he could not confront the monster alone. After all, most of the time, Kishiar would retreat and take command rather than exerting his own strength. The monsters Kishiar personally dealt with were usually taken care of out of necessity during dire situations, and it didn't seem that daunting or challenging.

However, that probably changed that day. After seeing the events caused by Kishiar, who, without a single weapon, boldly approached the massive monster, Yuder lost his confidence in defeating him.

'...'

With just a swing of his arm, without any particular preparatory movement, an enormous sound tore through the air. The monster, taken aback by the unexpected attack, lost its footing. As it howled and fell backward, a huge cloud of dust obscured the view, like a mountain collapsing.

Thinking that Kishiar was swallowed up by the dust storm, Yuder was about to rush forward when a white shadow briefly revealed itself, leaping upward. A cold, crimson gaze pierced relentlessly from beneath the fluttering white hem of his robe. Yuder, unknowingly, halted in his tracks.

Then, a tremendous battle ensued, one that could be a page in an ancient chronicle.

The monster howled in rage at the small human who dared to attack it. Its purple body swelled and a burning substance poured out, spreading through the smoke and melting the ground and rocks it touched. Its spiked tail and the long claws on its four legs easily shattered the solid mountain as though it were soft soil.

Even with the sight alone leaving most rooted to the spot, unable to move, Kishiar bravely held his ground. The Cavalry members present that day could barely grasp Kishiar's movements. Young Yuder, his eye for the flow of power not yet as sharp due to lack of experience, was no different from the rest. The fight unfolded so swiftly that they could barely see more than afterimages, preventing anyone from aiding him haphazardly.

Yet, because this was a dream, Yuder could somewhat clearly discern Kishiar's movements better than his memory served him.

Kishiar dodged the onslaught of attacks aimed at him with astounding speed, as if he had wings. Even with the simplest strikes, he managed to crumble the tough bodies of the monsters or playfully dodged around them, leaving them wobbling. His speed and power were so relentless that it seemed as though he was manipulating and repelling the bodies of the monsters even before they made contact.

Swinging, kicking, extending his arms - these were the basic moves of martial arts. But none could move as lightly, heavily, restrained, and yet freely as he did.

One moment he'd be here, rolling and stretching his body somewhere else; the next, he'd leap into the air and fall like an arrow from the sky in the blink of an eye.

As time passed, the body of the monster unable to withstand his attacks began to rip apart. While it bulged and swelled in an attempt to regenerate, Kishiar's attacks were faster. The clothes on Kishiar's body gradually became tattered, but his speed did not decrease at all.

Those gathered there lost themselves in the spectacle, forgetting even their own safety. They couldn't fully grasp how he was moving, but there was a simple, beautiful strength in Kishiar's display. Despite engaging in a primitive hand-to-hand combat with no weapons, the trajectory of his movements was surprisingly elegant. It was a compelling power that could captivate and pull at the heart of any human watching...

However, Yuder remembered how that battle ended. When the monster, dazed from the relentless beating from Kishiar, mindlessly chased after him, Kishiar lured it towards the cliff that Yuder had earlier collapsed.

"It's no use! I've already thrown it down there once, and it climbed back up, twice as big!"

No matter how much he yelled, Kishiar seemed not to hear him and continued to distance himself. Yuder, seeing the monster with half its limbs cut off still stubbornly crawling after Kishiar, turned his body. He shouted with all his might to the Cavalry members who might be listening somewhere.

"Now's our chance to move. Retreat quickly!"

And then, he ran frantically in the direction Kishiar and the monster had gone. Beyond the collapsed forest, he saw the monster moving forward with a roar and the white shadow that continued to draw its attention.

"What on earth is he doing alone...."

He wanted to move faster, but his body wouldn't cooperate. It was because of the blood slowly seeping from his stomach. Yuder clenched his teeth and summoned the power of the wind. As he jumped off it, the jumbled stones, broken trees, and mixed soil quickly fell away behind him.

"Damn."

Hearing his own grumbled curse, Yuder found his past self strange. He didn't know that he had chased after them so frantically without even taking care of his body. Was this what actually happened, or was this an exaggerated spectacle because it was a dream?

"Commander!"

At Yuder's shout, Kishiar who had just reached the edge of the crumbling cliff, halted momentarily. However, without any hesitation, he jumped into the air. With a full turn of his body, he soared precisely to the vicinity of the monster's head, extending his arm for the final blow towards its wounded face.

An energy, like a mirage, flickered mightily near Kishiar's hand and a horrifying scream vibrated the entire mountain. Black blood spurted from the monster's face and splattered up to where Yuder stood, a large chunk rolling towards his feet. It was the monster's tongue.

The half-protruded, thick, long mass of flesh wriggled like a snake while a peculiar line of blue light intermittently blinked on its surface. Uncertain if it was an illusion, it resembled a fragment of a magic circle. The shape felt oddly familiar, but he couldn't quite recall.

However, Yuder didn't have the time to dwell on this. The moment he turned his head, he saw the monster at the edge of the distant precipice, swaying as if it had lost its strength. Half of its face was blown off - either the attack hit its weak spot perfectly, or there was no further attack.

Moments later, the monster growled lowly and tumbled down the cliff. The cliff, sharp and peculiarly shaped as if precisely split in half vertically from the mountaintop, was a trap Yuder had set to kill the beast.

The entire ground shook with a thunderous noise, filling his ears with a deafening roar that rendered him dazed.

Unable to withstand the massive shock, the ground cracked and shuddered violently. The impact seemed to ripple towards the very edge of the cliff where the monster had been standing, causing it to crack again. Yuder quickly retreated, but Kishiar, who appeared fatigued, remained still.

"Commander!"

He called out again, but this time there was no response. Was he overly exhausted, or was he injured to the point he couldn't move? From this distance, it was hard to tell.

Finally, as the ground around Kishiar began to crumble, his blood and dust stained white coat swayed as if about to plunge down the cliff. In that split second, Yuder examined the tree and solid ground he had held onto for safety. He was safe here. As long as he was in this spot, he wouldn't be harmed. If Kishiar still had the strength he just demonstrated, a single leap should be enough to return here.

However, knowing this, after a brief passage of time, he let go of the tree he was gripping tightly.

The moment he stepped on the wind and jumped, the spot where Kishiar had been standing too began to fragment and collapse. By a hair's breadth, Yuder reached out and tightly grabbed the hem of the white coat. He couldn't fully embrace the blood-soaked body collapsing from exhaustion, but catching it was enough for now.

The face he managed to see was soaked with blood flowing from the nose, mouth, and ears, causing the golden hair covering his closed eyes to appear red.

With the last of his strength, Yuder summoned the power of the wind and wrapped it around both of their bodies. The violent wind flapped wildly, creating a long tail-like trajectory behind them. The two became one, endlessly falling down the mountain, down, down...

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The reason Yuder opened his eyes was because he felt a chilling premonition aimed at his throat.

His head was spinning, pulled abruptly from a dream of endless falling just moments ago, but Yuder silently surveyed the darkness. There stood a black shadow by his bed, a figure with no chance of being the priest Lusan, a sword pointed at his throat.

"Who are you?" he asked in a hushed voice, only for the sword to inch closer to his neck.

"Where is the prince?"

The question came out as a raspy whisper, deliberately altered with a substance.

Yuder said nothing in response, instead, he looked around him. Even in the darkness, if he focused, he could discern some semblance of presence.

'Five people. No, Awakeners...judging from the altered voices, professional assassins perhaps.'

"Answer me. Where is the prince?"

"An assassin, are you?"

Yuder quietly countered. The masked assassin chuckled in disbelief.

"The one asking questions is me, not you. If you don't answer this time, you die. Where is the prince?"

Instead of replying, Yuder exerted his power. The assassin's sword abruptly jerked upwards just as multiple sparks sporadically lit up their surroundings. The assassins, startled by the sudden light piercing their eyes, swallowed their breaths. Seizing the moment, Yuder sprang up, drew the sword beside him, and, reversing their positions, held the assassin by his throat.

The assassin reflexively launched his power, but the projectiles were redirected to pierce his bodies and his comrades'. In the blink of an eye, everything was over, and stifled screams filled the room.

"Ah, ugh!"

"Is it my turn to ask questions now?"

Yuder lightly smirked, holding his sword close to the assassin's neck. The reflected light from the blade cast an eerie, terrifying glow on his face. The assassins, unable to believe the rapidly reversed situation, gasped for breath as they squirmed around on the floor.

"How...how is this possible?"

"Why did you target me? Answer me properly how you managed to follow me here."

The assassins, quickly overwhelmed by the young man who seemed anything but formidable, considered suicide as soon as they realized they were dealing with someone extraordinary. A decision befitting professional assassins, but Yuder didn't give them the liberty to carry it out.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Ugh!"

Before they could retrieve their hidden poison, massive droplets of water materialized out of thin air, engulfing their heads and forcing their mouths open. The water, moving smoothly like an extension of Yuder, slipped through the cracks of their masks and into their mouths, extracting the concealed poison in mere seconds.

No matter how they struggled, the water didn't recede. Only when their consciousness was nearly clouded did the water finally disappear. After numerous coughing fits mixed with water, the assassins regained their senses to find themselves bound and unarmed.

"Cough...cough...cough!"

The water dripping from their heads and faces made them realize that the events had not been an illusion.

"What...what's happening?"

Observing the assassins' stupefied expressions, Yuder impassively lifted a finger. The water rippling above it was a clear manifestation of his will.

"Well... I ask again. Answer straight without giving me any trouble. If you don't, I'll show you something worse than death."

The speaker's eyes, darker than usual due to a particularly unpleasant dream he had awoken from, stirred an instinctive fear in the one who faced him. The assassins were terrified by the fact that, despite causing such tremendous chaos, they could not invoke even a slight surprise in the being before them - an action as insignificant as a breath.

They averted their gaze reflexively, bowing their heads in apprehension.

"We... we will answer. Therefore..."

"Answer in a respectful tone."

"...We will comply."

It didn't take long for Yuder to gather all the information he needed from them. They were trained assassins, bred to hunt their targets by scent. The scent was imparted onto one of Prince Ejain's personal belongings using the power of a deceased servant, and the original group of ten had been reduced to five due to an unexpected encounter with a monster.

The remaining five had followed Ejain all the way here, deliberating whether to pursue the thinning scent trail leading out of the base or the one still present within. Deciding it would be safer not to split their forces further, they resolved to find Ejain, who might still be hiding in the base.

And so, they had infiltrated the room of Yuder, upon whom Ejain's scent was strongest, waiting for him to fall asleep.

Their caution to operate under the assumption that Prince Ejain had already become aware of their scent and might play them after confirming the servant's corpse proved to be their downfall.

"...Did the scent cling to me because I shook hands with the prince at the end, and it transferred to my glove? We did hang around often, so it could have happened then. Either way, it doesn't matter."

Based on the information they provided, Yuder speculated, but the unconscious assassins before him could not confirm his hypothesis. With a familiar routine, he gagged them, bound their hands and feet more securely, and stowed them away separately under his bed and inside his wardrobe.

'Is it fortunate that they came to me first before the others here were harmed?'

In truth, if the assassins hadn't encountered the aberrant monsters in the dangerous wilderness, they would have left some members at the base and continued pursuing Ejain toward where Kishiar and his group had headed. The only seemingly positive outcome from the monstrous abnormalities causing widespread damage everywhere was this.

After settling everything, Yuder felt a discomfort lingering in the room. He stepped outside and stared at the swaying trees in the darkness. Inside the base, an unaware tranquility prevailed, as everyone had fallen asleep.

'The last place the assassins visited to confirm the servant's corpse must have been the safehouse where we spent the night. The ones who claimed to have fought there would be the Knights of Peletta...'

If so, Nathan Zuckerman, who was trailing Kishiar's group, and the Knights of Peletta, would likely also know this. They too would have ventured into the wilderness, but there were doubts over how smoothly they could have traveled with two servants in tow.

'I'm a bit worried they might have encountered the aberrant monsters.'

Even with Nathan Zuckerman, the Swordmaster, it was likely that there had been minimal damage, but Yuder hoped that they would find their way to him if possible.

'I'd be better off if I could go and find them.'

He longed to leave this place immediately. He suppressed this deep urge, alternately clenching and unclenching his hand, but in the end, his conclusion was clear. Sighing, Yuder reached into his pocket and pulled out two candies, then put one back in. While rolling the remaining candy in his mouth, the sweetness seemed to slightly soothe his frayed nerves.

At the same time, what came to his mind was part of a dream he had just before waking.

'The Battle of Pethuamet... that must have been it.'

Although the feeling had faded by half due to dealing with a tough issue right after waking up, one thing was certain. The largest monster he encountered during the Western subjugation mission, and the overwhelming force of Kishiar handling it.

He groped in the darkness of his memories, recalling the incident. The monster named Pethuamet looked identical to him, but was much smaller, leading a group of weaker individuals. Although there were cases of similar monsters banding together, it was the first time that a particularly large individual was seen with others.

The smaller ones could be dealt with quickly, but Pethuamet became increasingly more powerful as they attacked, causing extensive damage. What he saw in his dream was the day Kishiar stepped forward after days of siege and even a trap that collapsed a mountain failed.

He utilized the power of an Awakener, which he had not fully shown before, to kill Pethuamet. Only after killing that monster did they finally reveal that its weaknesses were its tongue and certain parts of its soft internal organs.

Even after that, many monsters appeared until the end of the campaign, but none like Pethuamet. And Kishiar, who had dealt with the creature, did not step forward again.

'I remember... when I enveloped the falling Kishiar from the cliff with the power of wind, slowing his descent for a safe landing.'

Although he fainted momentarily due to overusing his power, Kishiar, who woke up shortly after landing, told Yuder that he had acted unnecessarily.

“Why didn't you retreat as I told you? You could have died doing something pointless.”

The words he spat out immediately upon waking were remembered vividly in Yuder's mind after a very long time. Seeing that these buried memories surfaced so well, the stimulus received through the dream must have been significant.

To quell his unintentionally souring mood, Yuder rubbed his forehead with his hand, deciding to recall memories from a different direction. For instance...

'Pethuamet's tongue.'

The image of the cut tongue he had briefly glimpsed in his dream, and the blue light blinking on it, along with some patterns, came back to his mind. While dreaming, he felt it was familiar, but couldn't identify it. However, upon remembering it, he quickly figured out the answer.

Yuder turned his gaze toward the magic circles shining with a faint white light, or perhaps a blue light, not too far away. The patterns blinking on the severed tongue of Pethuamet he had seen in his

dream were alarmingly similar to these circles, meticulously restored by the mages of the Western Mage Union.

'I seem to recall thinking they looked like magic circles in my dream, but I can't be sure whether that was a complete memory from a previous life, or if my dream just mixed things up.'

While he didn't fully understand the magic circles, he knew that the person drawing them and the pattern and ancient language used varied completely depending on the magic to be cast. Yuder roughly drew the symbols that he had seen blinking on the severed tongue in his dream, tracing them with his toe in the dirt.

'When the day breaks, I must deal with the captured assassins and ask the other mages about this pattern.'

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The morning had arrived, and within the Western Mage Union, a minor uproar had broken out.

The union leader, Micalin, was taken aback by the shocking news reported by Yuder. The report claimed that during the night, five night visitors had infiltrated their stronghold. Afterward, upon seeing their beaten and bloodied figures bound up like fish, Micalin was rendered speechless.

"...Could they be dead already?"

"They are not dead, merely unconscious."

"But there wasn't that much blood before."

"They won't die from this amount of blood loss. So don't worry."

Micalin cast a new look at Yuder, the man who had single-handedly caught all the night intruders. When they first met, he had found the young man's character surprisingly mature for his age. Although he had kept quiet and appeared kind-hearted, primarily focusing on helping the mages under his command, his nonchalant attitude while looking at the defeated intruders struck Micalin as odd.

But what on earth was that dry, unbothered face in front of these tortured individuals? Even Micalin, who had become accustomed to surprises after experiencing all sorts of things, felt a chill down his spine upon witnessing Yuder's emotionless demeanor.

"So... you want me to find a place to detain them?"

"Yes. I'm sorry to ask this of you as these people have nothing to do with the Western Mage Union. However, we can't kill them right away. As soon as the rest of my group returns, we'll decide what to do. In the meantime, you don't have to worry about watching over them, I will handle that."

Yuder explained that these intruders were hired to disrupt a mission his group was performing. His demeanor while asking to borrow a holding place until his team could deal with the issue was so practiced, it seemed he had done this more than once or twice.

"The building next door could be used. Although it's partly damaged, the basement remains... It was originally used to store reagents, so it's sturdy, and the locking mechanism still works."

"That seems appropriate. Understood."

"Can I count on you to make sure they're not noticeable? We're just starting to recover some order, and it'd be troublesome if this event stirs things up again..."

"Yes. That's the plan."

Just as Micalin thought Yuder would immediately proceed, he paused in front of the unconscious group of five. It seemed as though he was lost in thought. Watching his brooding expression, Micalin asked inquisitively.

"Do you have anything else to say?"

"May I... ask you about something related to a magic circle?"

"A magic circle?"

The idea of this young Awakener, whose life and learning experiences were completely unknown to Micalin, asking about a magic circle intrigued him. Micalin felt a sense of pure curiosity and invited him to continue, "Go ahead."

"I feel like I have seen parts of a magic circle like this before, and I was wondering if you could recognize anything."

Micalin looked at the piece of paper Yuder presented to him. The drawn shapes, albeit clumsy, contained familiar runes and magic activation words. They were sufficient for identification.

"This is an amplification circle developed by our Western Mage Union."

"Western Mage Union's amplification circle..."

As Yuder mumbled Micalin's words, his gaze sharpened.

"Are you sure?"

"These characters here signify the beginning of a certain flow of magical power that our Union members possess. And this part is the central activation word for the amplification magic. It's a phrase that needs to be written multiple times. Even if I only played a small part in the development of the circle, I would still recognize it, wouldn't I?"

"..."

"But why do you ask this all of a sudden? Didn't you see it too when you went to the ruins with Lorna yesterday?"

Yuder replied slowly as he looked down at the characters Micalin pointed out.

"I dreamt about it last night and asked, but like you said, it seems like what I saw then is still imprinted in my mind."

"A dream? Heh."

The youth's face, which had been spine-chilling until a moment ago, began to feel somewhat human again. Micalin burst into laughter, stroking his rough ash-colored beard.

"You've drawn it quite well for something you saw in a dream. These magic circles are incredibly hard to memorize and draw, taking quite some time to learn. If you can remember this much after only one viewing, then your visit to the ruins must have left quite an impression on you."

"...Yes, it was impressive."

Yuder folded the paper and put it back into his pocket.

"But... may I ask one more thing? Could such a magic circle possibly be left on a monster's body?"

It was a somewhat odd question. However, among the mages obsessed with research, there were indeed those who did such things, so Micalin didn't find it strange.

"A magic circle on a monster's body? Hmm. It's possible for research purposes. But it's too much trouble. Instead of drawing the circle directly on the monsters' bodies to cast magic, I'd rather have them step onto an already prepared magic circle, or initially find a monster that can absorb magic. It's much faster that way."

"I've heard of monsters that can absorb magic, but do they also absorb magic circles?"

"If they can absorb magic that has already been formed from magic power, wouldn't they be able to absorb a magic circle with the same structure? Of course, I haven't tried it, but according to the records left by the Pearl Tower mages who created the Misty Wind Horse 450 years ago..."

Micalin enthusiastically quoted from past records to explain, but Yuder couldn't understand any more of his words. After his fiery explanation, he thanked Micalin, wrapped the unconscious assassins in the power of the wind, and slipped outside.

It was still early dawn, but thankfully Micalin was up early. Thanks to him, Yuder was able to quickly take care of the assassins and resolve his curiosity. He had just wanted to know if the magic circle from his dream really existed, but the answer he got was shockingly unexpected.

'It's not just any magic circle, but a part of the amplification circle created by the Western Mage Union...'

Was it really a coincidence that he saw that circle in his dream? It didn't feel right to dismiss it as a simple memory manifesting in his dream. In fact, there were quite a few pieces of information recalled in his dream.

Information that Pethuamet was first spotted near the Great Sarain Forest, and even the vague memory of Kishiar's ability.

The moment he thought of Kishiar in his dream, who had looked at him with twisted eyes, his stomach churned again. Despite trying to push the memory away, the dreams he had so far and the dream from last night kept intertwining in his mind, spinning thoughts like a mill.

Suppose the dream Kishiar, who chuckled while mumbling about breaking a pot while collecting the Red Stone, was indeed real. Honestly, it was just not in his memory, but if he assumed that it was real, the fact that the strange attitude of the previous life's Kishiar, which he couldn't understand, was mostly acceptable, he would've realized that several times already through his dreams.

In any case, if all of that were indeed true, Kishiar's condition from the viewpoint of the Western subjugation battle in his dream last night had certainly not been normal. He did not bring his divine sword, knowing full well that his life was in danger on the battlefield, nor did he use swordsmanship, magic, or divine power. If this were the Kishiar of this lifetime, he might have been concealing his power, but he certainly would not have refrained from using it even in dire situations.

But if his condition was abnormal, why on earth had he gone to such lengths to kill Pethuamet?

Of course, thanks to his intervention, all the Cavalry members, including Yuder, survived unscathed. But there was no benefit left for Kishiar. He was no longer involved in the subjugation himself, and he began to be surrounded by even more malicious rumors than before.

The past Yuder had not been particularly curious about why Kishiar had done that. He would have guessed that Kishiar had done it for some necessary reason, and he would have asked about it and probably been ignored, so he forgot about it.

No matter how much he thought about it, the only conclusion was that the power Kishiar showed at that time was akin to self-harm, and he couldn't guess the reason.

"Self-harm."

Yuder repeated the word he thought of, furrowing his brow.

If it were his past self, he would have thought that there was no word less suited to Kishiar than that, but now he could not be so sure. The pale face that had appeared before him, tearing his own arm off just before he came to the west, was still vivid in his memory.

Kishiar was a man who could potentially make the choice to harm himself for somewhat irrational reasons.

"For somewhat irrational reasons..."

The face from his dream that exuded cold anger the moment he asked him to back off flickered in his mind. It certainly did not seem rational...

His head started to hurt, so Yuder stopped walking for a moment and took a long breath.

"No. Now is not the time to speculate."

He had a duty to investigate other information he had heard from Micalin. Yuder checked a few pieces of information he knew about the magic-power-absorbing monster.

"I don't remember encountering any of the monsters I remember during the Western subjugation mission. What was Pethuamet's group like in my past life?"

The ones who resembled Pethuamet were a nuisance to deal with in groups, but they were not particularly difficult to deal with. Since there were not many mages in the West capable of dealing with them, they were mostly dealt with early on by the Cavalry members and Knights.

"At that time, hardly any mages came forward, so I don't remember whether the monsters had the property of absorbing magic power or not. It's difficult to remember this, given that I've dealt with more than a few monsters."

But as he rubbed his forehead, trying to recall, one thing came back to him. He remembered receiving a report that crop damage had been quite severe due to Pethuamet's group, who swarmed like locusts, destroying or consuming everything in their path.

Chapter 275

'An instinct to devour whatever comes its way. The first discovered place. And the amplification magic circle of the Western Mage Union...'

A few words were continuously spinning in his head, as if they were biting each other's tails.

While Yuder had locked up the assassins in the basement of the next building, he had been alternating between thinking about what had changed during his Western subjugation mission in his previous life and this life, and the new information he had discovered today.

As a result, a hypothesis floated in his mind.

'In my previous life, Pethuamet appeared later than now. It was in the midst of receiving significant damage within the western borders of the Empire. So, the mages of the Western Mage Union who were staying at this base at the time must have already been dead.'

Chronologically, Pethuamet appeared after some time had passed since the death of the Western Mage Union mages and the base had collapsed. If the mages had died unable to properly respond due to the onslaught of monsters behaving abnormally, what had happened to their research subject, the Magic Spring?

Even now, when it had only been under attack for about a day, it was so destroyed. It was an unvisited place where recovery efforts had been abandoned; there was nothing more to see.

This was the Great Sarain Forest, where huge trees mysteriously grew so much that, left alone even for just a day, there was not a single spot for a human to step foot, let alone after a week. The mages of the Western Mage Union had forcibly suppressed its power using magic to build structures and open paths, but magic wasn't eternal.

All spaces that lost their caster and controller would undoubtedly return to dense forest. There might have been Union mages left in other cities, but how many would have the courage to come here as the entirety of the West crumbled due to monsters? Even if they somehow managed to come, the chances of them surviving for long were slim.

The Pearl Tower, their only hope for assistance, had also given up expectations regarding the research of the Magic Spring. No one would have wanted to help with what happened here, and the poorly amplified Magic Spring must have been left neglected.

But while humans couldn't survive here, it didn't mean monsters couldn't. What if monsters capable of absorbing magic power happened to appear near this base and the Magic Spring Ruins, absorbing remnants of the broken magic circle, or perhaps the concentrated magic power flowing from the spring?

And if that had proven effective...

What would have happened?

"..."

The magic circle remaining on Pethuamet's tongue had been an amplification circle. The strange power of the monster, which kept growing and swelling despite all attacks, fit perfectly if one assumed it wasn't inherent, but originated from the absorbed amplification circle.

'...This is an excessive conjecture.'

For now, it was just a hypothesis. In this life, he couldn't be certain about something that hadn't even occurred yet. However, it wasn't entirely implausible either.

Yuder recalled the magic stones and all sorts of medium materials that had been embedded countless times in the trees, land, and rocks surrounding the Magic Spring to draw and maintain the magic circle. Suddenly, a cold breeze blew down his spine.

'What a pity. If only I had looked more closely at Pethuamet's severed tongue in my previous life.'

At that time, Yuder, without even realizing that it resembled a magic circle, had quickly forgotten everything while rushing toward Kishiar. When he retrieved Pethuamet's corpse after everything was over, he couldn't find the once-shining blue light anymore.

Yuder looked around at the various destroyed buildings that were once strongholds of the Western Mage Union. When he first learned about the mages of the Western Mage Union, he had merely assumed they were unfortunate souls who had died prematurely in a previous life. However, everything seemed different when he speculated that perhaps more things had started here than he initially thought.

The Cavalry members from his past life, Yuder, as well as Kishiar, were all so busy dealing with the situation at hand that they had no idea what they had missed. When the scenes he'd seen in his dreams suddenly overlapped with his current vision, a bitter taste filled his mouth.

'I still don't know why I keep having these dreams... but no matter how much I think about it, they can't just be simple dreams.'

After being pierced by the power radiated from the Red Stone, Yuder's body and power began to undergo unprecedented changes. It was around that time when the dreams began. Perhaps, those dreams signified another change taking place within him, not in his physical body.

Humans have a mind in addition to a physical body. Priests often referred to this as the soul. Although no one has ever seen or proven the existence of the soul, there was no more appropriate term to explain how Yuder Aile, who came back to eleven years before after dying, managed to retain all his previous memories.

If the changes initiated by the power of the Red Stone were occurring in both the physical body and the soul, where would they lead? Yuder wasn't fond of the fact that, unlike the body, it was impossible to know what and how the soul changed and what its original state had been.

It would be a lie if he said he wasn't anxious, but it had already started. No matter how many times he revisited the past, Yuder wouldn't change his choice to surround others with a protective power just before the Red Stone's power was unleashed. What had happened had happened, and there was still no change in the resolution he made when he realized he had been given another chance after death.

He would prevent the recurrence of disaster. Even the smallest thing not repeating the past was crucial. Considering this, he could say that his current situation was going extremely well. Yuder looked at his hand in the black glove and clenched it into a fist.

'I need to learn more about that amplification and the surrounding situation until the others come back.'

"It looks like we're about to reach the promised place."

Kishiar, who had been looking at the distant sky, turned his gaze towards Gakane, who was reporting. They had stayed up all night and had finally reached the trade route in the Great Sarain Forest where they were supposed to meet Ejain's men. Although they hadn't seen anyone else on the way due to the recent mass monster outbreak, the morale of the group was boosted merely by reaching their destination.

As they approached the meeting place, the silent Prince Ejain began to give detailed directions.

"It seems we're going the right way if we follow the color of the flag hanging on that branch. There should be a small mountain hut nearby where merchants and mercenaries rest. Those who came to pick me up should be there."

"There's a wooden house over there!"

The Eldore siblings who spotted the mountain hut pointed it out shortly after. Kishiar raised his hand to momentarily halt the group and looked around. He didn't sense anything unusual, but his intuition found the excessive tranquility somewhat strange.

The situation differed from the numerous encounters with monsters they had faced during their journey. The cool gaze hidden within the depths of his cap swept the surroundings before pausing on Ejain, whose expression had notably hardened.

"This place reeks particularly strongly."

"..."

"How many people did you say we would meet here?"

"I was told around 20."

"Considering that, the surrounding area is suspiciously quiet. We should check it out. Gakane, scout ahead."

"Yes."

"And Emun. Remember, your mission is only just beginning."

"Yes, yes. Excuse me for a moment, your Highness."

As the shadowy figure rose and silently ran towards the lodge, Emun Philang prepared his abilities to potentially conceal the Prince within the darkness at any moment, staying closely by Ejain's side.

Just as Gakane's shadow clone reached the lodge and opened the door, a barrage of sharp arrows erupted from within, as if they had been waiting for this exact moment. Had he merely approached and opened the door, he would have been seriously injured.

Kishiar laughed softly as he watched the arrows pass harmlessly through the shadow clone and embed themselves in random spots. A moment later, those who emerged from the open door wore baffled expressions.

"There's no one there. Who opened the door?"

But their bewilderment was short-lived; it didn't take long for their eyes to change as they spotted the Prince and the Cavalry members standing at a distance.

"...No, your Highness!"

"Modi, Klein. It's good to see you both here after so long. I didn't expect you two to be among those who made it this far. Jean and Vellentin are here too."

"Do you think we value our lives over serving you, your Highness? But why did you come here alone instead of sending the other attendants first as promised? We thought you were a monster or an intruder and attacked... We are truly sorry."

Between those who were uncertainly apologizing, suspicious gazes flickered toward the Cavalry members.

"But your Highness... who exactly are those with you?"

Ejain's subordinates wore common mercenary clothing, but their eyes were extremely sharp. At first glance, they all seemed to be of exceptional skill. But Kishiar's gaze easily caught the impure glint hiding within the welcoming expressions of those who had been waiting for the Prince.

'There isn't just one suspicious aspect.'

All the Cavalry members and Prince Ejain seemed to have noticed the strange element that Kishiar had picked up on, and were hiding their tense expressions.

"The other attendants will follow soon. These people have done me the favor of protecting me on the journey here, so do not treat them lightly."

"Understood. Everyone, please come in. You must have been exhausted from traveling through these treacherous lands."

"Before that, I have a question."

"Yes?"

Ejain turned to his subordinates with a bitter expression.

"Where are the others who were originally supposed to come, and why are only you here?"

In front of Ejain now stood less than ten of his subordinates. This was a far cry from the twenty or so he had been promised. The atmosphere among the subordinates grew tense in an instant, seemingly picking up on the guardedness in Ejain's gaze.

After a long silence, one of the subordinates awkwardly broke the tense air.

"What do you mean, your Highness?"

"I wonder where Lord Kivan, who should be responsible for you all, has gone, and why I cannot see Rhys and Chaise. They are capable rangers and should be involved in this."

"Didn't you know? On our way here, we had to constantly fend off trackers and monsters..."

"..."

"Since we had to come to you as quickly as possible, we couldn't afford to bring along colleagues who were falling behind. That's why Lord Kivan, Rhys, and Chaise entrusted your safety to us. We understand your unease, but it's excessive to doubt us without reason..."

"..."

"We think it's too harsh to..."

His stuttering trailed off as he noticed Ejain's increasingly icy expression. It seemed he realized that no matter what he said, Ejain would not be convinced. Kishiar stealthily gripped the handle of his concealed divine sword Orr from under his cloak, watching the man's hand slowly inching towards the sword at his waist.

"Damn it. He's damn quick at noticing. Get him!"

Finally, the man unsheathed his sword and began to charge. His colleagues too brandished their weapons and launched their attack. It was as expected.

"Prince! This way!"

After confirming that Emun had grabbed Ejain's arm and used his ability to disappear into the darkness, Kishiar swiftly drew his sword. While they were outnumbered, these foes were no stronger than the monsters they had faced.

"Keep them alive for questioning. Subdue them."

"Yes!"

With that response, Gakane's shadow clone and the Eldore siblings' body transformation abilities activated simultaneously. To avoid getting swept up in the sudden battle, Kanna stepped back, drawing her dagger and keenly observing their surroundings.

"A- Awakeners?"

"They're all just tricks! Don't falter!"

Finally realizing who they were up against, the opponents gritted their teeth and began to fight back. However, the outcome was quickly clear. Kishiar didn't even need to exert himself. As the ones with deep injuries to their limbs started being subdued one after another, rage and terror spread across the faces of the remaining few.

"...We can't... Scatter!"

When only three opponents were left fighting, the man with the loudest voice who had been encouraging the others cursed and retreated quickly. The others, after sharing a glance, scattered in different directions and began to flee. Gakane's shadow clone chased one of them, but was distracted by a bomb the man pulled out and threw, missing him by a hair's breadth.

A muffled bang sounded as the shadow clone took the full brunt of the explosion. A hole appeared in its chest, out of which thin black smoke billowed, and with a hiss, it disappeared. Wiping the sweat trickling from his forehead, Gakane watched the shadow clone vanish.

"Ah, damn... I'm sorry. I let him get away."

"It's okay. You did well. For now, let's gather those we've subdued."

Kishiar casually praised the Cavalry members before approaching the injured who were tended to by the Eldore siblings. Just then, Prince Ejain, after Emun had recollected his shadow power, approached with a pallid face.

"Have you dealt with everyone?"

"Regrettably, three have escaped."

"I see."

Ejain exhaled deeply.

"I owe you once again. Thank you."

"I only did what I ought to have done."

With a smile, Kishiar took a step back. The Eldore siblings also returned their colossal bodies to their original sizes and retreated with the Commander, leaving the defeated individuals to face Ejain's icy gaze alone. It was amusing to see these people, who had been so confident until moments ago, now wince in pain and avoid Ejain's gaze.

"Your Highness... Please, forgive us. We only followed orders..."

"I'm curious as to whose orders you were supposed to follow, because it should have been mine."

"We..."

Ejain smirked at the sight of their resentful expressions, struggling to continue their sentences. It was less the attitude of a wounded person and more a self-directed mockery. Perhaps sensing his seemingly softened demeanor, the defeated individuals began to squirm and beg for mercy.

"The... the ones who ran away planned this. They tricked us."

"Yes, it seems I have been used. Please, forgive me! I made a mistake despite knowing how merciful you are, Your Highness."

Yet, Ejain's gaze did not change. After glancing over the faces of those begging for forgiveness, he opened his mouth slowly.

"I accepted everyone who wanted to join me, believing that to stand against my brothers, I first had to match their strength. I thought that if I showed trust indiscriminately, I would eventually receive a response. I believed that this was a test that a magnanimous King like myself should endure."

"Your... Your Highness..."

"But now, I've come to accept. It wasn't real faith. It's shameful to think that due to my naïve stubbornness, I failed to protect those who truly needed my protection."

Ejain drew his own sword.

"Tell me what you did to those who have disappeared. That's the only answer you owe me now."

As fragments of a faint blue aura began to flicker on the sword blade, terror washed over the faces of those looking on.

"Commander, if it's not too much to ask, could you trace the footsteps of those who fled? I want to take responsibility and deal with these men myself."

Kishiar alternately observed the gasping traitors and Prince Ejain, who had turned his back with a sword in hand. From the Prince's back, he could sense an emotion much firmer than before—an emotion of someone who had fully experienced the bitter taste of life that no one could have anticipated on his journey out of the Empire. What had previously seemed like sheer chaos had apparently found some kind of resolution.

Kishiar slowly nodded toward the prince's steadfast figure.

"Very well."

Following Kishiar's gesture, the Cavalry members, who had been surreptitiously worrying about Ejain, also turned their backs and moved on. From behind them, suppressed groans and the smell of blood began to slowly permeate the surroundings of the mountain hut.

"Would the Prince be alright? He seems like a good man..."

Emun's question, filled with concern, faintly echoed. After a moment of silence, Kishiar flashed a smile.

'A good man.'

It was rare for a noble or royal to receive such an appraisal from others, despite not having engaged in much conversation for several days. Undoubtedly, it was for this reason that Emperor Keilusa decided to lend a hand to Ejain, after recognizing his modest potential.

Despite possessing admirable qualities, Prince Ejain had not been able to truly harness his destiny, lacking confidence in himself. Abandoning those who should be abandoned, and trusting those who should be trusted, was indeed a difficult task. Without conviction, blindly discarding everything or thoughtlessly believing might lead one forward, but how could the end of such a path be promising?

Kishiar surmised that, above all, Ejain needed that conviction to survive. And just a moment ago, Ejain had finally taken a step towards gaining it himself.

'The statement about the inability to progress by constantly abandoning means one cannot live merely by embracing everything.'

Fortunately, it seemed that Ejain had given some deep thought to the words they had briefly exchanged at the riverbank before dawn.

'Only if Prince Ejain survives can I receive the object promised to me, and only then can the future proceed steadily.'

The rumors about the other princes of Nelarn were not very favorable. There would be no better ally for the Empire and Kishiar than Ejain, who was receiving popular support from the common people and had the audacity to decide to join hands with the Empire. Kishiar earnestly hoped that this young prince would become stronger based on today's foundation.

'Then he wouldn't needlessly envy what others possess.'

The moment the dark pupils, which had been looking at him with utmost anxiety upon realizing he couldn't follow him here, surged into his mind, Kishiar unwittingly forgot all his political calculations up to that point. It was when he momentarily smiled gently that a desperate shout suddenly came from behind him.

"Die!"

A sharp murderous intent accompanied the clashing sound of metal on metal. The last of the betrayers was making his final attack, drawing a dagger he had hidden on his person.

The attack of an animal driven into a corner was beyond ruthless. Under normal circumstances, Ejain could have easily blocked it, but unfortunately, his physical and mental strength had been significantly drained from taking the lives of several people just moments before.

Light flashed, and a scream echoed.

Chapter 277

"Sir Aile? Is something wrong?"

"No, I thought I heard something for a moment, so I just checked. It seems I was mistaken."

"A sound? What kind of sound do you mean?"

Yuder paused briefly, detached his gaze from the depths of the forest he had glanced back at, and turned to look at Lorna. They were again on the move today, exploring the ancient site of the Magic Spring. The two other mages who usually accompanied them had decided not to join, preferring to prioritize the final stages of reinforcing their outpost's protective magic circles. Despite their absence, Lorna insisted on inspecting the magic circle control point around the Magic Spring and the surrounding warehouses, even if she had to do it alone. Such was her passion, and from Yuder's perspective, who had decided to revisit the amplification circle, it was a welcome development.

However, passion and fear were separate emotions. Every time Yuder paused and surveyed the surroundings, Lorna failed to completely hide her anxious expression. To reassure her, Yuder responded calmly.

"I thought I heard something like a human voice. It definitely wasn't a monster."

"I see."

Relieved, Lorna loosened her grip on the magic tool she had been holding tightly.

"The dense forest of the Great Sarain Forest doesn't absorb sounds but reflects them. It's been two days since the last monster incident, so it's possible that brave traders or mercenaries are passing nearby. Or... perhaps you heard the sound made by the deserters."

"There are deserters here too?"

Yesterday it was rumors of human trafficking, today it was deserters. There seemed to be quite a bit of peculiar information that only those who had spent a long time in the Great Sarain Forest would know.

"They show up from time to time. Most of them are escapees from the Western countries who sneak into the Great Sarain Forest. As you may know, the political situation over there has been unstable for quite some time and the hand of pursuit doesn't reach properly here."

Lorna replied casually, then slightly furrowed her brows a moment later.

"But the power of the Great Sarain Forest is hard for ordinary people to endure. I've heard that they usually don't survive for long."

Yuder recalled information from his past life, where the political situation among the Western countries had been quite unstable until King Ejain established his rule. Even after Ejain's coronation, countries like Durban had been noisy due to internal strife, so it was understandable that people who had prepared for death would choose to escape to the Great Sarain Forest to survive.

"I see. Before coming here, I thought there would hardly be any people in the Great Sarain Forest... But it seems there are more than I thought."

"There aren't many people who stay here continuously like us, but until the anomalies began, we would often see mercenaries and traders passing by from a distance."

After saying this, Lorna began telling him about a deserter she had vaguely seen from a distance several months ago while passing this path. It was an account of a sighting, a woman holding a young boy's hand, heading deep into the jungle.

"Perhaps there's someone in the Great Sarain Forest who has actually built a village, and we just don't know about it yet. There are such rumors, after all. Of course, I don't mean that I believe them. Even we have only been able to create this outpost over a span of several years. How could ordinary people who can't use magic do such a thing?"

By that point, the warehouse had appeared, so Lorna stopped talking. Following her, Yuder started meticulously examining the magic circles surrounding the warehouse as they walked.

"It seems a monster roamed the vicinity last night. I can see tracks drawn along the protection circle on the ground. First, we should go to the central control circle and rectify the position of the magic stones."

The site of the central control circle was, not unlike yesterday, left half destroyed and neglected. Lorna began to reposition the magic stones scattered haphazardly around the rocks, trees, and ground surrounding the magic circle, but realizing the task would not be swiftly finished on her own, she asked for Yuder's help.

"Could you lend a hand? It's simple, we should be done quickly."

"Understood. What should I do?"

"First and foremost, we need to restore this control circle, which is linked to the amplification circle within the Magic Spring. Just move the materials as I direct you..."

As directed by Lorna, Yuder used the power of wind and earth to move the magic stones and set them back in place. As the work progressed much faster than when Lorna had done it alone by hand, she appeared thankful yet fleetingly tinged with bitterness.

"You're doing wonderfully. Can you see the magic circle rising back into its proper form?"

"Yes, I can see it."

Yuder gazed up at the vast, increasingly vivid blue magic circle before him. It looked as if three magic circles had been combined in a crisscross pattern, and Lorna had told him the one on top was the amplification circle.

The pattern on the slowly revolving amplification circle, like the wheel of a carriage, undeniably resembled what Yuder had seen in his dream the previous night.

'So Micalin was right after all.'

Throughout the process of moving the magic stones, Yuder's gaze never left the amplification circle. After he had stared long enough to memorize the pattern, he spoke to Lorna, who was still busy with the task at hand.

"I've heard that this amplification magic circle was developed by the Western Mage Union, but how is it different from others?"

"It's all about efficiency. It has a protective effect that prevents the amplified power from dispersing indiscriminately. Considering the risk of the magic power inside the Magic Spring continuously amplifying until it explodes or leaks out, we developed it ourselves with that in mind."

Lorna's gaze turned to the amplification circle.

"We've worked really hard on it. But once we finished the development and installation, changes started to occur in the Magic Spring immediately. It made all our efforts worthwhile. Of course, its condition isn't great now due to the damage... but we must fix it soon."

She seemed quite proud of the amplification circle. However, after listening to her detailed explanation, Yuder felt even more uncomfortable than before. He couldn't put it into words, but he had a feeling that something very awkward was coming.

'In order to accelerate the stalled research and for efficiency, they added a protective power to the amplification circle... If it's true that cracks began to appear around the same time the circle was installed, would restoring this circle really be a good thing?'

The Magic Spring was originally a place where thick magic power gathered.

If Lorna was right and the Magic Spring had existed since a thousand years ago, then it may have been part of the history of this Great Sarain Forest from the very beginning.

Over nearly a thousand years, the forest that was once not so large expanded its territory gradually, consuming the borders of four countries and becoming an immense green land untouched by anyone. The historical records of the countries clearly confirmed that the forest had been expanding over time.

The Great Sarain Forest, known for its inexhaustible vitality that could not be quelled, no matter how much one attempted, and the last place where the deep and pure magic power had gathered, a power that was believed to have disappeared long ago. Had the Western Mage Union ever once pondered the possible connection between the two?

He wanted to ask, but he could not. Yuder quietly scrutinized Lorna as she began to restore the magic circle, lost in his own thoughts.

'If there is a correlation, forcing an increase in the magic power concentrated in the spring and containing it might have influenced the Great Sarain Forest and caused the crack to begin appearing here.'

But even if that were true, it was doubtful whether the mages of the Western Mage Alliance would be willing to dismantle the amplification circle they had worked so hard to develop and abandon their research.

"Sir Aile, could you please move that blue magic stone over here?"

Yuder halted his thoughts as he reflexively applied his strength in response to Lorna's request. Seeing the passionate gleam in the mage's eyes, who would not hesitate to give her life to restore the circle, it seemed that she had no interest in what Yuder might be thinking.

"When do you suppose we will be done with this?"

"We're almost there. It's difficult to restore everything, but once we adjust the position of those magic stones over there, we'll head into the Magic Spring to examine it. You must be bored, having come to see the spring and only doing this. Oh, are you very tired?"

"No, I'm not tired. It's just that the circle has been damaged for a few days now, and I'm wondering if the spring will be okay."

"It'll be fine. The amplified magic power might have spread a bit, but in its pure state, it won't harm humans."

Yuder, looking at Lorna's smiling face, cautiously drew a breath.

'Maybe I should prod a little.'

"If it does not harm humans... what about other things?"

"Other things?"

The smile on Lorna's face faded slightly.

"Are you suggesting... Ah, you mean that strange crack? But that..."

"No, I mean, for instance, what would happen if a monster that absorbs magic power accidentally appears nearby? I recalled hearing from Micalin that such monsters exist."

At Yuder's words, Lorna's eyes narrowed.

"There are such monsters, but they're extremely rare. Imagining one of those rare creatures coming all the way here to absorb the spreading magic power or the magic circle is quite pessimistic."

Pessimistic, was it really?

Just as Yuder was about to respond, Lorna suddenly turned her head.

"Did you hear that?"

"Pardon?"

"It sounded like there was a noise."

Chapter 278

There was no need to question what she meant. Almost instantly after she had finished speaking, a faint sound could be heard echoing from somewhere. It was as if someone was slowly stepping on fallen leaves or perhaps chewing on something brittle, a faint and eerie sound. Despite looking around, there were no signs of other people or creatures. Yuder felt his senses come to life, tingling throughout his body.

Following the chilly sensation that warned of danger, he slowly lifted his head. His eyes met with a monster perched high up in a tree, rustling leaves and drooling incessantly.

"A monster!"

"Fall back."

Yuder, ignoring Lorna's screams, stepped forward. The monster met his gaze with indifference, its tail hanging down, swaying while it continued to tear and munch on the leaves. Although its size was comparable to a small puppy, its tongue was long and thick, and its teeth sharp. He almost laughed upon seeing the dark, smooth fur, tinged with purple spots, and thorns embedded in its tail, which was much longer and thicker than its body.

'Is this why I had that dream yesterday?'

Though much smaller than when he had seen it in his previous life, he recognized it immediately. The monster was like a miniaturized version of Pethuamet.

"Do you know anything about that monster?"

"I don't. It's the first time I've seen this monster."

The chances of a monster with the property of absorbing magic appearing were incredibly slim, and though it was too pessimistic to imagine, what would Lorna say if the possibility was now realized? Yuder was curious, but he decided not to confirm recklessly when the answer was not certain.

Originally, people had given a separate long name to differentiate between the giant Pethuamet and the small ones. But if, as Yuder suspected, Pethuamet accidentally swallowed the amplification circle and became giant, there would be no need for such distinction if it was, in fact, the same as the smaller ones.

Yuder decided to simply refer to the monster as Pethuamet while inspecting the creature's surroundings.

‘There used to be a horde, but now there’s only one?’

Monsters that appeared in groups usually did so altogether. The probability was high that there should be a horde of similar monsters nearby if that one was here. But no matter how much he searched the upper parts of the surrounding trees, he could not spot any other monsters.

Yuder raised his hand towards the Pethuamet, which was still tearing at the leaves. Flames streamed out, burning the end of the branch the monster was perched on. Moments later, the shaking branch fell. Pethuamet, having fallen to the ground, squirmed helplessly on its back before eventually righting itself with its tail. It sluggishly shot a jet of black fluid towards Yuder in retaliation, but the weak attack failed to reach him, scorching only the innocent earth and grass before extinguishing. It was a mere matchstick flame compared to the terrifying power he had seen in his previous life.

Could this small, pitiful creature really be the same monster he had seen in his past life? It seemed so frail that one punch might kill it, an anticlimax that left him feeling empty.

Yuder watched the monster’s movements as it scurried about, seeking refuge, its short limbs flailing. As it moved, the thorns at the end of its tail, which dragged along the ground, left marks on the soil.

"Ah... that trace, it seems to match the one that has been lingering here and around the ruins since yesterday. I think it was left by that creature, not another monster."

Lorna, who had been retreating, seemed relieved when she saw the monster, which appeared much weaker than she had expected, and approached it. Yuder turned his head towards the magic circle where he had been moving the magic stones just moments before. The faint traces left there and the

ones left by the Pethuamet, which was now spinning around in place, looked strikingly similar to what she had said.

"...I see."

He had thought that the creature which left those traces would be large, given that most of the monsters that had appeared due to the anomaly were of considerable size. With this new piece of information, his previous assumptions began to churn in his head again.

'If my thoughts are correct, it can't be mere coincidence that these traces were left only in this area, full of magic power.'

"Sir Aile. This creature keeps heading toward the magic circle. Perhaps we should kill it and then investigate further," Lorna called to him.

While Yuder was lost in thought, the Pethuamet that had been spinning in place suddenly picked up a direction and slowly began moving toward the magic circle. It greedily licked up any noticeable grass and fallen leaves along the way, but being so small, it did not seem to make a difference.

Yuder was about to draw his sword from his hip to kill the Pethuamet when he paused, looking down at it.

"Why do you hesitate?"

"I'm curious why it keeps wandering near the magic circle and the Magic Spring. Do you mind if we observe it for a bit?"

"What?"

Whether Lorna was surprised or not, Yuder had shifted his gaze to follow the Pethuamet's movements. The creature had reached the edge of the recovering control circle and was sniffing around, its snout lifted towards the sky. It stuck out its long tongue through its large mouth relative to its body, but the invisible wall created by the protection circle did not allow the monster's approach and bounced it back.

Even after being repelled several times, the Pethuamet did not stop sticking out its tongue and disappointedly nibbled on the grass nearby. It then slithered around the blocked-off area, continuously sniffing around until it found something and quickly stuck out its tongue. This time, it had picked up a fragment of a dark blue stone. The moment the tiny shard, smaller than a fingernail, reflected the light and gleamed, Lorna's eyes widened and her lips parted.

"That looks like the fragment of a magic stone I was cleaning up earlier...!"

Before her muttering could end, the Pethuamet had already shoved it into its mouth.

"No!"

Unable to wait any longer, Lorna activated her magic tool. A sharp wind spell erupted from the short club-like tool she held in her hand, striking the monster's head.

With a piercing scream, the Pethuamet spewed black bodily fluid. Its entire body turned a deep purple, then black, over and over again. Its entire body began to swell like a boil, prompting Lorna to cry out.

"Are you just going to watch? We need to deal with it now!"

Yuder drew his sword, holding it by the handle and forcefully stabbed downward, piercing the Pethuamet. The creature, pinned to the ground, convulsed a few times before weakly sticking out its long tongue. Only after he pulled out his sword and cut off that tongue did its squirming movements finally come to a complete stop. Just as in his previous life, that long tongue was indeed its weak point.

While Lorna hurriedly ran towards the magic circle, Yuder knelt on one knee, examining the dead Pethuamet's corpse.

"It's gone."

"What is?"

"The shard of magic stone it had put in its mouth."

"It must have dropped somewhere since we killed it before it could swallow."

Lorna was busy examining the magic circle, seemingly indifferent to this matter. But to Yuder, it was not the same. The shard of magic stone was nowhere to be found, neither inside the gaping mouth of the dead Pethuamet nor in the surrounding grassy area. Then he noticed a faint blue light flickering amidst the piece of severed tongue soaked in black body fluid.

"Ah, here..."

He hurriedly picked it up, but the light flickered once more before going out completely, never to return.

"..."

'Damn it.' An unspoken curse lingered in his mouth for a moment before disappearing.

'But I didn't see it wrong. I can't show this to Lorna, but I have to tell her.'

This was definitive evidence that supported his speculation that Pethuamet was a monster that absorbed magic power. However, seeing Lorna so engrossed in studying the magic circle, his original plan to show her the severed tongue and explain his theory suddenly changed.

'...To what extent will she actually believe and consider what I say?'

They had been discussing the possibility of a magic-power-absorbing monster just before Pethuamet appeared. Even if he said that such a monster seemed to have actually appeared now, he had a strong premonition that she might dismiss it as a misunderstanding or view it as an attempt to disrupt her research.

'To that mage, the most important thing is the continuation of her ongoing Magic Spring research. She wouldn't welcome any topic that could potentially interrupt it.'

Nevertheless, Yuder had no doubt that he wasn't mistaken. The light he saw had the same color as part of the magic circle that flickered from Pethuamet's severed tongue in his dream last night. He glanced at the tongue in his hand before hastily stuffing it into his pocket.

'I'll have to take this and show it to Micalin. It would be better if the same kind of monster doesn't appear again.'

However, his bad premonition usually turned out to be accurate in such cases. After stopping the restoration of the magic circle, going into the Magic Spring, verifying that it looked no different from yesterday, and coming out again, they encountered another Pethuamet.

"It's the same monster from before!"

It was smaller than the Pethuamet they had killed earlier. Yuder killed it again with his sword, protecting Lorna as they quickly returned to their base.

They headed straight to Micalin and began reporting what had happened that day. Yuder, who had merely listened to Lorna's reports a step behind her the day before, did not do the same today. After her lengthy explanation about the magic circle and the Magic Spring, and her brief addition about the monster, he went out with her, but soon snuck back to Micalin on his own.

Micalin, who had been busy checking his books, looked puzzled when he saw Yuder.

"Hmm? Do you have something more to say?"

"Yes. I have something personal to discuss regarding what happened today."

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The elderly mage put down the book he was holding and removed his glasses.

"Go on."

"I'm going to discuss the monster we encountered today."

Yuder didn't stretch out his explanation. He briefly shared his observations – the behavior of the Pethuamet, its voracious appetite, the traces it constantly left while prowling around the magic circles and the ruins, and even the shimmering light from its tongue as it tried to swallow the magic stone. After explaining all that he had seen, he succinctly conveyed his conjecture.

"...I think this monster possesses the ability to absorb magic, as you've mentioned before. Although I've managed to kill two of them, there may be more hidden or could appear in the future. We need to respond quickly."

"If that's the case, there's a high likelihood it truly is a magic-absorbing monster. By response, you mean... extermination?"

The astute mage was quick on the uptake. However, Yuder's objective was not merely about extermination.

"Yes. We need to find out how many more are in the forest and deal with them. I can handle that alone. However... I'd like to request that, in anticipation of any possible scenarios, apart from basic protection magic, we cease all other magic circle activities and momentarily deactivate them."

"Deactivate the magic circles?"

"Yes. Not only because of the monsters, but there are other reasons too..."

A momentary twitch appeared at the corners of Micalin's wrinkled eyes.

"That's problematic."

Cutting off Yuder's words, the elderly mage answered firmly, a low chuckle escaping his lips moments later.

"Look here. You may have learned a little about magic since coming here, but magic circles aren't so easily deactivated and reinstalled on a whim. If anything, pushing for a swift recovery might work, but deactivation is out of the question."

"So you're saying it's entirely impossible to deactivate."

"It's not about impossibility. If you deactivate the amplification circle set up there, all the effort we've put in thus far would go down the drain. It would mean restarting the research that has taken considerable money, time, and manpower to bring to this point. Do you think you can handle that?"

Micalin shook his head, murmuring "That's not going to happen."

"You said the monster is very weak. I don't think we need to go that far."

"I understand your concerns. But in a situation where we have no time to properly recover the damaged circles, what if the monster absorbs even a part of the amplification circle? Then... it won't be just a weak monster anymore."

"You've got quite an imagination. This isn't a matter for the Awakener to decide, but for us mages who understand magic. Let's leave it at that."

It wasn't mere imagination. In his previous life, this might have actually happened. But Micalin made it clear he didn't want to talk about it any further. By mentioning the Awakener and mages at the same time, he implied that Yuder's actions were being seen as excessive interference, an overstep of his bounds.

Their hard-earned trust was at risk. Provoking him further wasn't a good move.

'I understand, but...'

Still, Micalin's attitude was disappointing. His somewhat changed demeanor from when they had promised cooperation before triggered Yuder's past memories. After defeating Pethuamet and witnessing Kishiar's figure swaying on the crumbling cliff, he had to take a deep breath to regain his composure. As he opened his eyes after a brief close, the surged emotions consumed his heart like flames.

'Indeed, stepping back just won't do.'

Yuder opened his mouth once more.

"I understand your perspective, Leader. But may I add one more thing?"

"As long as it's not about abandoning the amplification circle, feel free."

"This is a continuation of the cooperative discussion we had a few days ago."

Carefully observing any minor changes on Micalin's face, which looked somewhat colder than before, Yuder spoke.

"Both the Leader and we agreed that there may be a connection between the strange cracks and monster anomalies observed in the Great Sarain Forest and the Magic Spring, and we decided to cooperate. Do you remember?"

"I may be old, but my mind is still sharp."

"The period when the cracks began to be observed coincides with the time when the amplification circle was completed and changes began to occur at the Magic Spring. It's also roughly the same time when the monsters began to act unusually."

Yuder continued his train of thought.

"If all of these are indeed related, shouldn't we naturally consider the amplification circle that triggered the changes in the ruins?"

"That's..."

The expression swiftly drained from Micalin's face. Yuder watched him, sensing his great discomfort and anger at the mere mention of the amplification circle, but forcing it down.

"Since problems arose with the amplification circle surrounding the Magic Spring, new cracks have not been observed and the monster anomalies have not recurred. I can't deny that there's some correlation in all of these events. What do you think, Leader?"

In the two days of receiving reports from Lorna and reorganizing the base, Micalin, as the Leader, would have speculated similarly to Yuder. The evidence was clear in his gaze. However, he had kept

silent all this while, even promptly changing the subject when Yuder brought up the amplification circle due to the monsters. In the end, he too was a mage who prioritized research.

Everything was connected. The magic power from the Magic Spring, the Great Sarain Forest, the amplification circle that changed the Magic Spring, and the subsequent appearance of cracks and monster anomalies. If traced back, all these events led to the mages' research. Would they have to disregard the amplification circle and abandon the research simply because it was a waste?

The answer was clear. The ones turning a blind eye were the mages.

"I didn't bring up the amplification circle merely because of the appearance of monsters absorbing magic. You, Leader, and the Western Mage Union have already suffered significant damages due to the monsters' anomalies. But let's also consider the other countries and imperial citizens in the western area who have suffered even greater damages, and continue to do so. We all know what the priority is now. It'll be too late once something else happens."

Yuder had said something similar when he first met Micalin and requested his cooperation. However, unlike then, Micalin didn't say anything, his brow furrowed.

The situation had changed so much that they might have to start the ongoing research from the beginning, or perhaps stop it altogether. His demeanor had changed so drastically just with the addition of this harsh reality. Within his piercing, eagle-like amber eyes, numerous worries surged like waves.

"...It's difficult to give an immediate answer."

In the end, Micalin had turned away from Yuder's gaze.

"Would it not have been better if you asked to understand the principles behind the magic circle near the Magic Spring, the geography of the Great Sarain Forest, or offered swift assistance in monster subjugation? But the amplification circle... I did not anticipate having to intervene that far. There are too many here who stake everything on the outcome it could bring. I can immediately cooperate on anything else, but I need you to understand that it's difficult to decide this matter on my own."

"Didn't you say that it is shameful to turn a blind eye to what happens in the pursuit of truth? Yet you are saying this now?"

At the pointed comment, the ends of Micalin's pale brows trembled. The elderly mage was fiercely conflicted between his own shame, the intensely desired research objectives, and the audacious young man standing before him, eventually bowing his head.

"Was it not agreed that detailed cooperation would be discussed when your companions return, not now? It is not that time yet."

"..."

"Please leave."

The order to leave was finally issued. Yuder closed his mouth and turned around.

'If Kishiar and the others return as promised tomorrow, I'll start with this discussion.'

There was a possibility that Micalin and the mages of the Western Mage Union could completely reverse their cooperative stance before their return. Feeling a bit sorry at the thought that the returning Cavalry members might be dumbfounded or disappointed, Yuder decided not to regret the words he had just spat out to Micalin.

'After all, it might have been strange to hope everything would go smoothly with a partnership gained through a mere introductory letter from Thais Yulman.'

The mages weren't bad people. Both Lorna and Micalin were quite reasonable and intelligent. It was just that he hadn't properly understood that their reasonableness was only in areas outside of their research.

'So, this situation was bound to happen.'

If even Micalin, who was in charge of this place, couldn't be convinced, there was no chance for things to improve through conversation with those under his sway. If Micalin were to completely refuse cooperation afterward, it seemed better to handle the work alone, as he always had, rather than hoping for cooperation with them.

Moving alone had been his forte since his previous life. It was much more comfortable for Yuder than considering others.

However, he couldn't easily quell his troubled feelings.

'Have I become weak?'

It was worrisome. Now, more than ever, was a time when strength was needed. Yuder sighed, rolling the last piece of candy in his pocket with his fingers.

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'What would Kishiar have done?'

He wondered if Kishiar, rather than himself, had been here, could he have convinced Lorna and Micalin? Despite assuring himself that this situation was the best possible outcome, an unsettling feeling of failure continued to intermittently surface.

Yuder was fumbling with a piece of candy when he stopped, finding a bulky object that filled his opposite pocket. In the heat of the conversation, he had completely forgotten about the Pethuamet's tongue he had stashed away.

'I was going to show it to Micalin... Now it's useless.'

The chunk of tongue he pulled out was hard and black, looking like a charred piece of wood. He contemplated throwing it away, but he was too late in sensing someone approaching him from behind.

"Sir Yuder, what are you doing here?"

Turning around, he found Priest Lusan standing there. Despite his fatigued complexion, Lusan showed a genuine smile of pleasure at seeing Yuder.

"I was just having a chat with the Union Leader. How about you, Priest...?"

"I've just finished tending to the critical patients and had some food. Finally, I can breathe a little."

Lusan, who had answered, then lowered his head toward the Pethuamet's tongue in Yuder's hand.

"But what is that? It smells rather unpleasant..."

"It's a tongue I cut from a monster."

"Wha-?! A tongue?"

Lusan took a step back in surprise.

"Why are you carrying such a horrid thing around? You must know that the corpse of a monster is almost poison itself..."

"I'm wearing protective gloves, so it's fine."

Upon seeing the black gloves Yuder always wore, Lusan muttered, "Uh, hmm. I see. But even so..."

"You really need to be careful handling the bodies of monsters. Even if your hands weren't in the state they are... Uh-hum. Hmm. Anyway, we're the only two here, so you should be more careful."

In Lusan's familiar worried gaze, there was an unmistakable sense of closeness. The warmth he radiated was born out of a shared sentiment towards the only other person left with him here. Only then did Yuder fully realize he was not left here alone. A sense of warmth began to return to his previously cold body.

"...I see. Thank you."

"Haha, you're welcome. But what on earth are you planning to do with that tongue?"

Yuder alternately looked at the Pethuamet's tongue and Lusan's face. He hesitated, wondering if he should speak, but then his mouth opened naturally.

"It's not for my use. I just... I was wondering if this might be the reason our cooperation with the mages comes to an end."

"Huh?"

Lusan asked again, as if he had misheard.

"While I was focused on healing, what on earth happened... No, let's not talk here. Let's go somewhere quiet and discuss this. Oh. Right. Please tell me in our quarters. That would be better."

Although he suggested this, Lusan, who had spent the last two days sleeping by the patients' side, didn't even know where their quarters were. So, Yuder had to lead him. Lusan, sitting awkwardly on the bed, clenched his fists and took a deep breath, only to jump up in shock when he spotted a bloodstain on the floor.

"What's this blood? Did you get hurt?"

Yuder recognized the blood he had discovered as traces left by assassins the night before. He realized he ought to inform Lusan about this.

"No, it's not my blood. It's the blood of assassins who infiltrated last night."

"Assassins...? Surely, you mean...?"

Lusan's eyes trembled uncontrollably as he mouthed, "They were after the Second Prince of Nelarn, weren't they?" Yuder nodded, assuring him that there was no need to worry as he had already dealt with the assassins, who were now sleeping soundly in the basement of a nearby building. More importantly, there were the circumstances that Yuder had discovered while following the mages to the Magic Spring.

While Yuder explained the things he had seen and experienced following the mages to the Magic Spring, Lusan listened attentively without interruption until the end. Finally, after he had finished recounting the appearance of the monster today and the conversation with Micalin, the room fell silent again. Yuder, observing Lusan deep in thought, gently broke the silence.

"The situation is as it stands, but you should continue with your duties. There's no need to be overly concerned..."

"So, you're just planning to observe the situation until the Commander and the group return?"

Lusan interrupted Yuder's words with a soft question. His clear, green eyes, reminiscent of tender sprouts, stared directly at him.

"Isn't that so?"

"..."

Of course, it wasn't. Despite failing to persuade Micalin, considering the unpredictable whereabouts of Pethuamet, he absolutely couldn't stand idly by. He planned to slip away in the cover of evening darkness, heading again toward the Magic Spring, and it seemed as though Lusan had read his mind, nodding in affirmation.

"I thought as much."

"...I plan to visit the Magic Spring tonight. I can't leave a monster that absorbs magic roaming around."

"You'll go even if I advise against it due to the danger, won't you?"

"Yes."

Upon hearing the firm response, Lusan's expression grew serious.

"I thought so after hearing your story, but as I expected... you're uncompromising when it comes to doing what you believe is right. Ah, don't get me wrong, that's a compliment."

Compromise. Considering his relationship with the mages, it might have been wiser to compromise and patiently wait for a night. However, as the only person who knew about the potential danger Pethuamet might bring to this world, Yuder absolutely couldn't do that.

'There's no guarantee that the result of compromise won't lead to a future similar to my previous life.'

As he fell silent with these thoughts, Lusan scratched under his chin and cast his gaze downward.

"I've seen and heard things while treating the injured mages here. That's why I think I understand why the head of this place has stepped back. I've never seen people who are as dedicated to their research as the people here."

"..."

"But I don't think you need to step back because of that. The reason the Cavalry came this far is to help the many people who might be suffering due to the monster outbreaks in the West, isn't it? What you're trying to do now is also for that."

Lusan met Yuder's gaze with a resolute look in his eyes.

"In truth... After hearing your speculation, Sir Yuder, I was reminded of a verse from Chapter 1 of the Sacred Text. As you know, the text teaches the fairness of light, always warning against any disturbances to balance. Would it not be natural for the other side to react in response when one side of the heavenly scales wavers? It might not be strange to think that the unsettling of the balance of the Magic Spring that has been present for a long time could result in such consequences."

Yuder's eyes widened slightly. The idea that the disturbance of the Magic Spring's balance had led to these results intriguingly stimulated his senses. It was a frustrating feeling, as though the answer was just out of reach.

"And now, I too am part of the Cavalry. How could I not be concerned? If there is any way I can help, of course, I will do my part. Just let me know."

Lusan, who had added these words with a hint of embarrassment, wore a determined expression. Yuder found this unfamiliar, creating a strange sensation as he looked upon Lusan's face.

Priest Lusan was someone he had never encountered in his past life. He had chanced upon him during a plan to topple the Apeto Family, and his exceptional divine power caught the attention of Kishiar, leading to his appointment. After joining the medical division, he had often received praise

for getting along well with Enon and the other members, unlike his previous haughty demeanor as a member of the Temple of the Sun God.

Yuder had never paid much attention to Lusan in his past life, as he had never met him. But in contrast, the fact that Lusan, who had no previous association with him, unreservedly trusted him as a comrade from the same unit made him acutely aware of the difference between his past life and the present.

As his self-doubt and anxiety faded away, his mind seemed to function more efficiently than before. Gathering his thoughts, he expressed his gratitude to Lusan.

"Thank you. Even your words just now could be of great help."

"Ah, no. It's not as though I've said anything particularly insightful..."

"No, you're mistaken. If you, Priest, had not been consistently dedicated in helping the union mages here, we wouldn't have been able to get this far in the first place."

At those words, Lusan's cheeks flushed momentarily. He scratched his head, avoiding Yuder's gaze.

"Well... It's embarrassing to hear you say that. In truth, I wasn't particularly altruistic or anything... I used to be criticized at the temple for not acting like a proper priest. If I appeared dedicated, it was only because I wanted to be helpful in your mission."

Lusan's face, as he softly confessed that he had felt nervous about sounding presumptuous, having recently joined as a priest, was overflowing with happy emotions.

"So, please tell me if there is anything real I can help with. Quickly."

Looking at Lusan's eager face, Yuder took a moment to contemplate. The young priest didn't seem like he would back down. Lusan, too, was now a member of the Cavalry, so why should he exclude a colleague and make things difficult for himself? While he couldn't bring the young priest, who seemed not to have fully adapted to the energy of the great forest outside, there was plenty he could do inside. For instance...

"Understood. For today, could you help me keep the fact that I have been going in and out a secret? And, if possible, could you inquire about the research being conducted in the Western Mage Union among the other mages... Is that something you can do?"

"I can, but is that all you need?"

Yuder silently gave a small nod.

"Consider whether there might be more I can assist with before you depart. Oh, and before that, please have your hand healed. Just in case."