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Chapter 281

The task Yuder had entrusted to Lusan was far more critical than he had initially anticipated. The mages, though they had received help from Yuder, an Awakener, had failed to eradicate their inherent skepticism and vigilance. However, their attitudes in the presence of the priest were different. With Lusan, who had supported them without expecting anything in return, there was a high likelihood of learning new information they had not known before.

To receive healing from Lusan, Yuder removed his gloves. He had been exerting himself for several days, but his spots hadn't spread much, and their color was faint. However, the power that had been continuously manifesting strongly after presumably absorbing power from Kishiar had now stabilized to a level no different from usual, seeming to have run its course.

'Considering myself as a medium... It might be as if all the absorbed power inside me has been depleted.'

Would absorbing more of the power stored inside Kishiar return him to a state where his power manifested strongly as before? Or would there be other changes? As he pondered this and watched Lusan extend his hand for healing, Yuder suddenly turned his head at the sound of rough footsteps outside the door.

"Priest! Priest! Are you here?"

"Yes, I'm here. What's the matter?"

As Lusan responded, Yuder quickly put his gloves back on. The door opened, and a mage poked his head in, shouting urgently.

"The ones who went out to inspect the magic circle were attacked by a monster! They're in serious condition. Could you come and see them right away, please?"

The mage's hands were smeared with blood. Lusan's complexion changed.

"A monster attack. Has there been another anomaly?"

"No. It's just one monster. It was a tiny creature at first, but it kept growing and getting stronger with each attack. They said it wouldn't die no matter how much they attacked it with magic tools. Eventually, someone was wounded by a spike on its tail and ran back here. It seems like it was venomous..."

He didn't need to hear more. It was Pethuamet.

Just as in his previous life, the same event was happening.

"...Priest Lusan. I think you may need to forget the discussion we just had."

Yuder whispered softly so that only Lusan could hear, then turned away. In the looming darkness of the Great Sarain Forest, the branches swayed ominously.

"Urgh, arrgh..."

"Stay with me! Where's the antidote? What? That was the last one?"

"Have they found the Priest yet?"

"They found him! He's here!"

The only remaining intact building at the base was a pandemonium of injured people and mages who had gathered around them. Yuder followed the mage who was leading Lusan, scanning the surroundings. Micalin, the leader who was anxiously moving around the center, shouted loudly when he saw Lusan.

"Everyone, make way for Priest immediately."

As the mages stepped aside, a path was cleared for Lusan to approach the injured. Yuder, looking past them, was taken aback to see the face of a mage gasping for breath. Lorna, who had been having a normal conversation with him just a few hours ago, lay there with a face darkened by the venom.

"Her condition is serious. I'll try using my divine power for now, but we need to simultaneously proceed with extracting the venom from her blood."

"I'll help with that."

Yuder rolled up his sleeves and stepped forward. He was likely more competent at this task than the inexperienced mages. Seeing Yuder's face, Micalin's lips tightened, but he didn't say anything.

Yuder unsheathed a dagger someone had given him and cut across Lorna's arm where a wound from the tail of the Pethuamet remained. The dark blood that had been slowly seeping out began to rapidly pour, pooling on the floor. Fortunately, it hadn't been long since she was wounded, so after some time, the color of the blood became clearer. Upon confirming this, Lusan poured even more of his divine power and several mages completed a detoxification spell, giving strength. Gradually, Lorna's complexion began to regain its color.

Around that time, Yuder stood up and faced Micalin.

"Why is she injured? Didn't you already go into the forest during the day?"

"...After our conversation, I thought I needed to inspect the place myself."

Micalin mumbled, supporting his head. It was only then that Yuder noticed the blood, dirt, and wounds that marred his clothes and hands, unlike before.

"I took Lorna and a few other mages who had been continuously examining the place. While observing the control array, the monster you spoke of appeared. We attacked it with a magic tool and killed it. After hurriedly cleaning up its remains and preparing to complete the check, we realized... "

As the Pethuamet received attacks, it slowly inflated. Despite the mages' attempts to kill it, the monster unhesitatingly devoured the materials and magic power that formed the magic circle. When Lorna, remembering too late that Yuder had killed the monster by cutting its tongue, was injured as she stepped forward, and the arrival of other monsters attracted by the Pethuamet's cry was sensed, the mages had no choice but to retreat hastily.

Micalin's eyes twisted with self-reproach as he recounted the events that had unfolded as Yuder had predicted.

"It seems that every time the monster absorbs magic or other power, it uses it for physical amplification. Ordinarily, the body should explode when it expands beyond a certain limit, but because of the power of protection circle superimposed on the amplification circle we created, that limit has probably been extended beyond comparison..."

Then, a gloomy howl and vibration were felt from a distance. As Micalin closed his mouth, everyone's gaze anxiously turned toward the outside of the building.

"It seems to be following us here soon... The priests and you stay inside and assess the situation. We will prepare to respond."

Even as Micalin spoke of response, he did not believe that the Western Mage Alliance, full of injured and unable to fully restore the defensive magic circle, could withstand the Pethuamet. Seeing this, the mages also wore dark expressions, as if accepting their fate.

Yuder, looking down at Micalin's battered hand, calmly asked,

"Before you last retreated, how large was the monster?"

"Why do you ask?"

"This place is full of magic circles and magic power that the monster can devour. It would be better to go out and lure it to the opposite side before it grows too big to handle."

"If it can be done, it would be better. But who are you suggesting should take such a dangerous task in the Great Sarain Forest after dark? He'd be lucky not to die before even luring it."

"I will do it."

In an instant, the surrounding mages collectively held their breath.

"...Did you, not hear what I just said?"

Micalin clutched his throbbing head as he questioned,

"No matter how powerful an Awakener you may be, or even though you predicted a situation where such a monster might appear, you are not invincible. I have my own pride and dignity. It's our responsibility, not yours!"

"But staying here passively won't guarantee safety either."

His words were chilly but held truth. Micalin could not deny it.

"If we try to confront a monster that only grows bigger when attacked, while leaving a place full of the wounded behind, it's even more dangerous. The patients can't even run away on their own."

Yuder glanced around. The mages seemed perplexed by his words.

"I don't think I can defeat it all on my own. Therefore, I need your help."

"...You really think you can defeat that thing outside?"

One of the more familiar mages stammered in a trembling voice.

“How in the world...”

“We have to deal with it while it’s still small, so we can’t afford to waste time. I will go out immediately and find that monster. While I draw its attention and make it chase me, you should clean up the other monsters that swallowed the amplification circle and find the highest point in this area.”

“Is that all?”

“That’s all.”

“...Why are you going so far?”

Micalin asked, her wrinkled eyes filled with an indiscernible emotion, amidst the mages who looked utterly bewildered.

“Are you not angry with us? Even if you said you’d go out with the priest alone, we wouldn’t have been able to say anything. Why take on the most dangerous task...”

“If you find a spark that could turn into a wildfire, it’s best to extinguish it while it’s still small.”

A calm voice devoid of much emotion flowed out.

“And I’m just a person who’s a bit better at putting out fires than you. I wasn’t particularly angry with anyone.”

Of course, he was a little disappointed, but that was it. It was okay because the current Pethuamet didn’t cause the same massive damage as in his previous life. Although he was weak when dealing with monsters, he was confident enough to confront Pethuamet at his current size, thanks to his experience from his previous life.

“So, is there anyone willing to help?”

At Yuder's question, the mages looked at each other. After a moment, volunteers began raising their hands and voicing out, “I’ll do it.”

During the short time that the volunteers were deciding their roles, Yuder took a black lump from his pocket and handed it to Micalin, who still had a complex expression on his face.

“What is this?”

“It’s the tongue that I cut from the monster I mentioned earlier.”

Micalin nearly dropped the black lump in surprise but managed to catch it.

“A tongue, you say?”

“The tongue that had swallowed a magic stone and emitted light before going out. I don’t know much about it, but as a great mage, I thought you might be able to find something out, so I brought it.”

At Yuder’s words, Micalin sharply scrutinized the black lump. After a while, he let out an audible sigh.

“...If traces of it are still in here, we might be able to deactivate the amplification circle that the monster outside has absorbed.”

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"Is that really possible?"

Surprised by the unexpected words, Yuder looked towards Micalin who slowly nodded in confirmation.

"If it were any other magic, it would have been difficult, but we created the amplification circle, so we can interpret the remaining information much faster. This is, of course, assuming that there are still remnants left... but if we simply confirm... We'd have to look into it more thoroughly to be sure, but I don't believe it's nonsense."

Throughout his explanation, Micalin took frequent short pauses, seemingly engrossed in rapid thought. Finally, with a determined expression, he turned his body.

"Pause the conversation!"

His voice rose towards the group of mages who had been diligently dividing their roles in a circle, causing the noise to lessen as all eyes shifted toward him. Holding up the tongue of the Pethuamet in his hand, Micalin briefly explained its identity and called out several mages by name.

"You all can probably guess why I called your names."

"Do you intend to find the remnants within it?"

"Yes, we can't afford to waste any time. We need to find out before the power of amplification absorbed by the monster becomes too immense."

The mages Micalin had called were deeply involved in the development of the amplification circle with him. Realizing his intention, their expressions hardened, shifting through a range of emotions.

"But, Leader. Even if we extract the information, we need a large amount of magic power and a controller to disable it. With our current shortage of personnel, how can we..."

"We don't need to worry about the magic power. Isn't it already here with us?"

At Micalin's heavy retort, the eyes of the mages widened. A profound shock coursed through them like lightning.

"Do you intend to use the Magic Spring?"

"Yes."

"But then, all the magic power we've amplified until now...!"

Micalin's sharp gaze fixed onto a mage who couldn't help but exclaim.

"Weren't you all just willing to risk your lives to help those who might die trying to put out a forest fire? Was that a lie?"

"..."

"We can always seize an opportunity if we're alive, but what can we truly gain after losing our honor and lives?"

The mages remained silent. From afar, the ominous sound of something exploding, accompanied by a low, mournful howl, echoed alongside the vibrations.

"The most pressing issue right now is to deal with the situation at hand. If we let others handle the issue caused by the amplification circle we created, even if we survive, the honor of our Western Mage Union will never be restored. Remember this."

After his final words, Micalin immediately moved to the upper floor with those he had called. The remaining mages split into two groups; one to guard the base, and the other to move with Yuder.

"Sir Yuder! My apologies. I would have liked to accompany you, but I'm not confident about navigating through the forest at night..."

"Don't worry. You don't need to be so concerned."

Chasing after Yuder who was ready to head out, Priest Lusan wore a face full of worry.

"Still, just in case, take this."

What he handed over, out of sight from the mages, was a small cloth pouch.

"It's filled with pills made from herbs that Mr. Enon gave me, and some of the Holy Water I brought. They're effective against venoms and wounds."

As he took the pouch from the other's hand, Yuder felt its significant weight. Silently, he slipped it into the pocket inside his coat and bowed his head in gratitude.

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it. I'm sorry I couldn't give more... Please remember that your safety is paramount. You should be cautious, especially if the situation becomes dire. But remember, there are others with you."

Upon hearing Lusan's words, faces of his comrades, whom he hadn't considered in the light of an urgent situation, flashed through his mind. By the time the night passed and the dawn broke, it would be time for Kishiar to return as promised.

Were they, by now, on their way back after delivering Ejain to its destination?

Had they encountered enemies or monsters along the way?

Would Kishiar be alright?

"...Yes. I will be careful."

After mentally erasing the last expression he had seen on the other's face, Yuder quietly turned away. The mages, who had agreed to synchronize their movements with him, followed him with solemn expressions.

Yuder's goal was to sort out the situation before Kishiar returned. However, as always, things didn't necessarily go as desired.

Yuder left the protective magic circle that encased their base, heading toward the Magic Spring along the established route. Before long, a few tiny Pethuamets appeared, but he left them to the mages to take care of and continued moving without delay.

The roaring of monsters and booming noises that had been audible even inside the building now echoed continuously in his ears as he stepped outside. The sounds were terrifying; the surrounding Great Sarain Forest was trembling and the landscape was crumbling.

Although the mages faltered as if frightened, Yuder didn't hesitate. He urged them to quicken their pace while he listened to a brief description of the local landscape. The information he wanted was the location of the highest ground nearby.

"If we go further north from here, there's a high hill. Of course, the path up there is entangled with trees, making it not easy, but among the rocky terrains, it's the highest."

"It seems quite close to the Magic Spring."

"Yes. It's near. But it's the highest place we could lure it to right now. To find higher ground, we'd need to travel... about a day more."

That was undoubtedly too far. Acknowledging this, Yuder listened intently to the gloomy roars and explosive sounds of something being crushed and shattered that came from not too far away. It didn't seem too distant.

'I thought the creature would have come straight to the base, but it seems to have changed direction for some reason. It has gone further than expected.'

"When we last saw it, it was about the size of a small horse. It must have consumed all sorts of things on its way here, so who knows how big it's now..."

A mage, who had gone with Micalin and Lorna to examine the magic circle, murmured nervously. He had been speculating the entire time that the reason for Pethuamet's voracious appetite was its ability to absorb small amounts of magic power present in everything.

"There's no need to be anxious. If we encounter the monster, please act as I advised earlier."

"Understood."

Yuder intended to launch an attack the moment he encountered the Pethuamet. Like other monsters, the Pethuamet was not a creature capable of advanced thought. Creatures guided solely by their instincts would primarily pursue anything that attacked them or annoyed them.

Therefore, Yuder had asked the other mages not to attack Pethuamet. Even if it was a small Pethuamet that hadn't absorbed the magic circle or any other monsters, Yuder had to take care of it by himself.

Of course, a direct attack might not work with Yuder's power, but there were many geographical features of the forest that could serve as weapons alongside his sword. The larger the Pethuamet grew, due to the many obstacles, the more its movement would be restrained, which would be more advantageous for Yuder.

"That direction. I can still hear loud noises."

Then, another mage who had gone a little ahead pointed in one direction.

"But it's... It sounds too noisy for a monster."

“Surely not. It must be a mistake. Who could be here at this hour...”

“But isn’t that fire...?”

Alongside a suspicious mumble of one of the mages, a sudden red light flashed from beyond the forest. At the same time, the monster's roar echoed loudly again. The earth vibrated, causing the entire forest to tremble, and the mages swallowed their groans, holding onto the trees.

“There was no mention of that monster being able to spew fire!”

‘No, that's not the power of Pethuamet...’

Yuder squinted at the light. A strange hunch had come upon him.

“Wha, where are you going!”

“I'll go ahead. Please, slowly follow while looking around.”

“What did you say?”

Leaving the mages behind, Yuder began to run as if stepping on the wind. Every time he swung his hand, the trees bent their bodies laboriously to create a vacant space for him. His fingertips tingled, and soon his destination came into view.

Yuder swallowed his breath and stopped.

The first sight he saw was Pethuamet, which had grown to the size of a small house. Every time its massive tail cut through the air, all the nearby trees melted and shattered, creating a wide ruin that resembled a clearing.

And in front of it, several people were struggling to combat the monster.

"What the hell! How do we bring down such a goddamn monster!"

"Digon! Stop using that damn fire! If the forest burns completely because of you, what will happen to our village!"

"Didn't you hear me? Lure it somewhere else, you dimwits! Stop sending it this way!"

The ones swearing at each other didn't seem to be professionally trained knights or mages. They varied in age and gender. But when Pethuamet spewed its body fluid to attack, they each demonstrated their abilities and retreated in an instant. A defensive wall made of fire and water flashed and radiated light.

'...Awakeners.'

He realized right away. They were Awakeners.

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Yuder sensed their intent to attack Pethuamet once again and flew into action. He simultaneously blocked attacks from both sides with a wall of water and wind, which caused smoke to billow into the sky and momentarily eased the situation. It took more strength than usual, but it seemed to have prevented things from worsening, which was fortunate.

"A mage, perhaps?"

"No, an Awakener!"

"Who are you?"

Seeing Yuder suddenly reveal himself, the startled Awakeners drew back defensively. As they did, Yuder studied them closely and asked quietly.

"I should be the one asking. Who are you, and why are you battling this monster here?"

From their immediate skepticism that he was a mage, it seemed likely that they were aware of the presence of Western Mage Union mages. However, their identities were still unclear. Upon hearing Yuder's question, one of the Awakeners cautiously began to reply.

"We were just... trying to prevent that creature from approaching our village, so we lured it here..."

"Shut your trap, and keep quiet!"

"But if he's also an Awakener, we don't really need to..."

"I said shut up!"

Another awakener forcefully struck the back of the one who had spoken. But by then, they had already revealed enough.

'A village, they say? Do they live here? If so...'

Judging by their ordinary attire, it seemed plausible that they were the displaced civilians Lorna had mentioned. But could such a large group of Awakeners be simply considered displaced civilians? As silent glances of suspicion were exchanged, another group came to Yuder's mind, one that he might guess from his memory.

'...Could it be?'

Before coming to the West, Kanna had gleaned information from the Star of Nagran brothers, Gayle and Doyle, that one of their bases was nearby.

Yuder quickly shook off the image of the burned face of Nahan, the first image that came to mind when thinking about the Star of Nagran, and frowned. If these people were truly from the Star of Nagran, the

timing was incredibly tricky. He wanted to confirm more clearly, but with Pethuamet again growling threateningly, he decided to postpone the conversation for later. Turning his back on the Awakeners, Yuder spoke out loud.

"Cease your attacks and withdraw. This monster grows larger with every attack. From now on, I will be the one dealing with it."

"We know that the damned thing grows with every attack, but how the hell are you going to kill it on your own? Do you have some sort of brilliant plan?"

The oldest looking of the Awakeners, a squint-eyed man, asked. Instead of responding, Yuder drew his sword and blocked Pethuamet's swinging tail with the power of wind.

Rather than clashing with flesh, it felt more like colliding with a slab of metal, his body forcefully thrust backward amidst the loud noise. The pressure transmitted through his sword made him grit his teeth involuntarily. Even though it was still small compared to the size of the creatures he had faced in his previous life, the force was tremendous, enough to slightly bury his heels into the ground. As Pethuamet, seemingly surprised by the unexpected force exerted by a small human, momentarily halted its movements, Yuder shifted his gaze toward the man who had asked the question.

"I believe this should suffice as an answer."

"He's really holding it off alone..."

Turning to the astonished murmur coming from behind him, Yuder spotted the mages from the Western Mage Union who had belatedly followed and yelled out to them.

"The target has been identified. We will begin luring it soon. Please stand clear!"

"Understood! But who are those people over... gah!"

The mages, who had widened their eyes in disbelief upon spotting the Awakeners, screamed instinctively and scattered as they turned and saw Pethuamet, having sensed the arrival of a new enemy. Pethuamet had begun to slowly lumber after them with a thud-thud noise.

'This can't happen.'

The mages had planned to deal with the other monsters in the vicinity as soon as Yuder encountered Pethuamet. They would then move forward and use magic to change the color of the leaves in the trees above the path to their destination, guiding the way. Yuder glanced at the Awakeners after a moment, noticing a tree not far away whose upper leaves had turned golden.

"We'll talk later. If you are willing to help us kill this monster, please assist the mages with the other monsters. If not, please stand back so as not to interfere."

"What, what did you say?"

"What will you do?"

The Awakeners, looking at each other's faces again, focused their attention on the squint-eyed man. Muttering a curse under his breath, the man made a decision, responding, "Alright."

"If you fail, it's going to head to our village next, so we don't have a choice. Damn it, what kind of situation is this? Anyway, if you say you can kill it, let's talk after it's over."

If Yuder were the same as when he only knew about Nahan, he would never have asked these dubious people from Star of Nagran for help, no matter how urgent the situation was. But he remembered the face of Kanna, who had given him information about the brothers Gayle and Doyle. After becoming Awakeners, the brothers had been shunned by those around them. They had joined the ranks of the Star of Nagran as they wandered around starving. He couldn't be unconditionally hostile with this information.

They seemed to have run into this situation unprepared, and he decided to focus on the fact that they had more volunteers to help deal with Pethuamet. Apologies to the mages of the Western Mage Union,

but a ragtag group of awkwardly gathered Awakeners seemed far better than mages who could hardly handle attack magic.

Yuder postponed making a judgment on the situation, instead leaping into the wind and slashing down on Pethuamet's head with his sword. A scream filled the air as black blood splattered. Eyes slit vertically were filled with a burning hatred as they glared at Yuder.

His entire body prickled with intense murderous intent, causing him to instinctively shrink back. However, Yuder shook off the sensation with a quick deep breath. Holding his sword ready, he scanned the path marked by the gleaming golden leaves above his head. The darkness was thick in the Great Sarain Forest, making it difficult to even locate his allies nearby, but the purple venom leaking from Pethuamet's body was bright enough to be eye-watering. At least, he thought, it was a blessing that he couldn't lose sight of his target in the dark.

"Alright... watch me."

He hadn't been able to kill it in his previous life, but this time would be different.

In this life, it wouldn't be Kishiar who killed Pethuamet. It would be him.

As Pethuamet began to follow him, Yuder launched an attack while retreating. Harnessing the power of the wind, he rapidly shifted positions. The essence of this luring operation was to deal the real attacks with his sword.

Though it stung his pride to imitate the movements he had seen from Kishiar in his previous life, the method certainly worked like a charm. Pethuamet stopped chasing the others and started following Yuder alone.

Every time the monstrous figure of Pethuamet collided with the gigantic trees, they shattered and snapped with tremendous noise. However, the beast, blinded by bloodlust to consume the annoying human, paid no mind. Yuder dodged the sweeping tail overhead, ducking and retreating. Every time the monster's venom and body fluids grazed his bare skin, he felt as if he was occasionally touched by fire.

Launching himself upward with a leap, he landed a blow on Pethuamet's back. Hearing a shriek of pain, he instantly switched his position again. As he momentarily conjured a flame to illuminate his position, a furious claw swiped at it as if to crush and extinguish the light. However, Pethuamet could grasp nothing.

The monster's roar reverberated through the forest. Yuder got the impression that the cries were becoming louder and more inflated.

'I think there were people who bled from the nose or had ruptured eardrums just by hearing the roar when it got any bigger.'

He wondered if the weaker mages who were listening to these cries were alright.

Yuder, again, had to dodge the venom spat by Pethuamet, hurling his body into the air. In his stead, several trees which received the venom collapsed backward with a mournful sound, melting away.

Panting heavily, he looked up to see the tree leaves shimmering in golden light above the forest.

'There it is.'

Up until now, the lure had been working well. The passage of time felt as long as a day, which was a problem. But, he had not received a single injury and everything was going smoothly.

"Come on... follow me more...."

In response to Yuder's muttering, Pethuamet roared with anger. With a dull feeling in his head, he felt an itch inside his ear, then something trickled down. Seeing that the loud noise was now halved, it appeared that his eardrum could no longer withstand and had burst.

'Maybe it's better since I can't hear that noisy roar.'

However, not hearing meant a disruption in the process of detecting and dodging the monster using all his senses. Yuder couldn't dodge the tail of Pethuamet, which suddenly appeared from the side where he couldn't hear, and was hit at the end.

'Ah, damn it.'

His body flew, grazing several trees and plunging into the ground with the feeling of shattering. Yuder immediately rolled his body to avoid the attack of Pethuamet, which was falling directly overhead.

With a tremendous tremor, the massive body that could crush anyone whizzed past the side of his head.

'Damn it!'

Feeling around, he found that the sword he was holding was gone. There was no time to find the sword in the dark, so Yuder, his mistake burning bitterly, immediately moved his body again.

"Hey! Are you okay?"

A familiar voice worried about him from not too far away. It seemed the Awakener who had agreed to assist him was nearby.

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"Hey! Are you alright?"

A worried unfamiliar voice resonated not too far from him. It seemed that Awakener nearby had decided to help him out.

Yuder evaded the attacks relentlessly using the power of the wind and raised his voice.

"Do any of you have a sword?"

"What, a sword?"

"I dropped mine! It'd be nice if there was a spare one, but if not..."

His speech was cut off as a claw narrowly grazed his earlobe. He clamped his mouth shut and vaulted onto the branch of a large tree, causing the monster, Pethuamet, to roar savagely. The sound was venomous enough to make his unresponsive ear feel numb.

Yuder clung to the tree, gasping for breath, feeling his head spinning.

"Got it! You said a sword! I'll find and throw one to you, just keep going!"

Fortunately, it seemed that his intended message had been properly conveyed, as the stranger responded affirmatively. Yuder did just as instructed and leaped from the giant branch. As he moved, Pethuamet bounded after him, clawing at the ground. The constant noise of the ground crumbling and the forest being destroyed by the rushing monster followed him. The smoke exuding from the venom spilling from Pethuamet shrouded the forest in darkness, creating an apocalyptic spectacle.

Luring Pethuamet was undeniably one of the most challenging and strenuous tasks Yuder had undertaken since his return from the dead. To keep the monster's attention, he couldn't escape too quickly. But, the moment he tried to use his usual powers to protect himself, the beast would absorb his strength and grow even stronger, necessitating extreme caution.

Whenever Yuder felt the presence of mages or other Awakeners fending off monsters nearby, he used fire or water powers, risking danger to draw the slowing Pethuamet's attention. Despite his best efforts to not provide any opportunity for absorption, Pethuamet had grown larger than when the baiting first began.

Dodging the collapsing trees overhead, Yuder turned his gaze towards a faintly twinkling golden tree not too far off. Given that the golden light took longer to appear this time, he sensed that they were also in a difficult situation. That golden glow, and the ceaseless loud noises from around, were all evidence of the Western Mage Union mages risking their lives to guide him on the right path.

Wiping the mixture of sweat or blood, he couldn't tell which, trickling down his forehead and neck, Yuder poured strength into his legs. The adrenaline-driven pulsing sensation of his muscles and lungs threatening to explode had oddly quietened after surpassing a certain limit.

And finally, a bright red tree far off in the distance shone brilliantly, indicating its presence.

'Finally.'

The red color was the signal agreed upon to indicate when Yuder had reached the highest terrain. The Western Mage Union mages had succeeded in guiding him through the darkness and countless obstacles to the very end!

The moment he realized this, the world's stillness vanished and the muted sounds and speed all returned to normal.

Rrrrrraaaaahhh-

As Pethuamet's roar rocked his field of vision, Yuder stumbled and turned his head. He found himself staring directly into the monster's enlarged eyes and pupils. Seeing Pethuamet bare its teeth and halt momentarily to spew venom, he seized the opportunity to fling a rock he had been clutching while fleeing.

The stone, propelled by a wind-laden arm, found its mark in one of the eyes of the Pethuamet. As black blood splattered in all directions, the beast shrieked in agony, lighting up the surroundings once more.

In order to properly lure the creature, it was essential that its eyesight remained unimpaired, hence the previous avoidance of such attacks. But now, the situation was different. They were nearing their destination, and it was necessary to land a more lethal blow to drain the creature's strength.

Vaulting with the wind, Yuder dashed past the final golden tree and towards the shimmering, red tree uphill. Numerous attacks targeted him in the meantime, more ferocious than before. He owed his untouched state to his instinct, reflexes, and the memory of the long-accumulated experience.

"Over here! This way!"

From not too far away, someone wearing a mage robe waved frantically and shouted.

"Head straight, and you'll reach the end of the hill! And your comrades at the base said..."

As brave as the mage was to signal his position while gesturing, he could not finish his words. He stumbled and fell due to Pethuamet smashing the ground with its tail. Luckily, an unremarkable-looking young Awakener, dressed in worn-out clothes, appeared out of nowhere. He caught the mage by the armpit and whisked him up into a tree, preventing further harm.

It was uncertain whether proper cooperation took place, but considering the dire circumstances, it seemed they were able to help each other effectively, which was a relief.

"Everyone nearby, back away now!"

Yuder, running towards the visible end of the hill, shouted at the top of his lungs.

"The moment I reach the end, I'll collapse this entire area!"

"Hold on! Your sword!"

The young Awakener who saved the mage shouted from high up in a tree.

"We found your sword, take it!"

Without hesitation, he threw the long sword he was holding. Yuder easily caught his sword, which was enveloped by the power of the wind. Despite repeatedly striking the monster, whose hide no ordinary weapon could penetrate, and being drenched in corrosive, venom-infused blood, the sharpness of his sword was undiminished. It truly was a top-tier sword made from Eucalractus.

As Yuder reflected on the fact that Kishiar was the one who gifted him this sword, he was momentarily overwhelmed by a strange sensation, forgetting the pressing situation. Even though he knew Kishiar wasn't present, the moment he gripped the sword's handle, an odd sense of stability washed over him, as if Kishiar was backing him up. This strange yet familiar sensation seemed to drown out Pethuamet's murderous intent, his throbbing ears, and his pounding head.

However, this moment was fleeting, and Yuder was thrust back into reality. He leaped back to evade Pethuamet, who rushed forward with its mouth agape, ready to swallow him. As he vaulted on the wind and looked at the terrain, he spotted steep rocks lining the bottom of the tangled hillside.

'This should be enough.'

While the elevation was on the lower side, this just meant he had to dig deeper into the earth.

'The only concern left is whether my remaining power will hold...'

He had expended more energy than expected in getting this far. Even in his previous life, it had been challenging to muster enough power to alter the terrain more than once a day. It was ironic and regrettable that the excessive power surge, which had been uncomfortable since the day he seemed to absorb the chunk of power within Kishiar, chose to settle when he needed it the most.

'If that had been the case, just a little effort could have achieved what I want... Well, there is no helping it. I would have to make do with the strength I have.'

Yuder paused, stopping just before the end of the hill. The prey it had been chasing turned around, emitting an abnormal aura, which prompted the Pethuamet monster to halt its movements and adopt a defensive stance. Onlookers hidden nearby held their breaths as they watched a monster, grotesquely swollen in spots, and a much smaller human locked in a standoff, each aiming for the other's life. It was time to see whether the man could, as he had assured, single-handedly defeat this nightmarish monster.

"..."

Amid the tension, Pethuamet made the first move. Just as the monster was swinging its massive, spike-studded tail as though to strike at any moment, the mages and Awakeners swallowed their screams at the sight of Yuder, who still did not dodge...

Rumble. The ground shook as though thunder roared from the storm clouds above.

"An earthquake.....?"

A mage hiding nearby mumbled in a daze. Pethuamet also flinched to a halt. The monster, which had been about to attack, stopped and looked down at the trembling ground beneath its feet, confused.

"The air... no, the entire forest is..."

The young Awakener, who had tossed a sword to Yuder, uttered in a breathless voice, watching the shivering tree branches and leaves. Indeed, it wasn't just the earth that was shaking. As the trembling sound grew louder, it felt as though the trees, rocks, the air, and finally, even the sky beyond, were shaking.

And at that moment, when the tiny tremor quickly rose to its peak like a bouncing ball hitting the ground...

With a tremendous roar like the opening of the heavens and the earth, the entire hill collapsed.

"Aaargh!"

Everyone screamed as the sound of the shaking earth and the collapsing sky continued unabated. Dust, smoke, and the palpable waves of enormous power induced terror in everyone.

It was awe-inspiring.

The force of nature, which no one had ever imagined could be controlled by human power, was responding to someone's will.

For thousands, tens of thousands of years, the colossal force of nature, always stationary, had stirred to life. No one dared to think of escaping while nature's huge body was moving. They were completely dominated by sheer overwhelming force, fear, and awe.

After what seemed an eternity, the earthquake and dust finally began to subside. A mage, his face pale as if on the verge of passing out, barely managed to rise and shake the magic tool in his hand, emitting light that brightened their surroundings.

"My God....."

The scenery they had been looking at just moments ago was nowhere to be seen under the faint light.

The tall hill, which had been standing firm like a giant beast in a crouch, was more than half gone, leaving only a sharp cliff, as if it had been cut artificially. The endless pit that was dug out beneath was so huge it seemed more fitting to call it a valley.

Sporadically erupting like spears from underneath were rocks, and atop them was a glimpse of the monster's body, impaled by the fall. The monster, which until now had appeared so big and terrifying, lay collapsed like a helpless little beast, its long tongue hanging out, completely drained.

All eyes were on the man with black hair standing in front of it, holding a sword, and everyone fell silent. No one could express the emotions they were feeling.

Yuder very slowly raised his sword, then brought his arm down toward the shining blue tongue. It was such a slow attack that even a child could have dodged, yet Pethuamet couldn't evade it. Its limp body twitched a few times, but that was all.

After a moment, the enormous tongue was cleanly severed by the sword, spraying a vast amount of body fluids. The man, covered from head to toe in the fluid, watched it until the blue light from the severed tongue flickered and finally stopped.

At last, when all the light had ceased and Pethuamet's torn pupil was relaxed, the sword in Yuder's hand also dropped lifelessly to the ground. Just as everyone was about to gasp, watching his body collapse in a stagger, a shadow flew in from afar in an instant, jumping down fearlessly to catch him.

Turning

Chapter 285

His body felt unbearably heavy, as if he couldn't lift a single finger. Despite the faint will that remained, his vision was dark and he could hear nothing, leaving him unsure whether he had fallen to the ground or was merely standing. These were typical symptoms that appeared when all the strength in his body was exhausted.

This was the first time he'd experienced such a phenomenon in this life, but he wasn't surprised, as he had experienced it a few times in his previous life. Regardless of how powerful one may be, there is a limit to the amount of energy a single body can hold. In his previous life, he had increased the amount of energy he could store through constant training, but he had not been at it long this time around, leaving him inevitably at a much lower capacity.

Yuder closed his eyes and slowly continued his breathing. Suddenly, he remembered the first time he'd experienced a similar phenomenon. Was it when he'd caused a valley in the west to crumble, standing in front of swarming monsters, squirming like insects? Once the sensation in his body, which had been abruptly cut off like a thread, had returned, Kishiar was there in front of him.

He was looking down at Yuder, who was lying down, with a very complicated expression. Whether he was smiling or perhaps angry, facing that expression, Yuder managed to gasp out a single sentence.

"I've found all ten methods to remove the ashes."

He fainted immediately afterward, so he didn't hear Kishiar's response, but the feelings from that moment came back very clearly.

The relief and joy that came with the sudden disappearance of all the anxiety he had been carrying.

And some sharp, intense emotion that was pressing hard enough to cause a numbing pain in his chest.

When he naturally recalled the memory of that unfamiliar emotion, which felt like it was both his and not his, Yuder suddenly felt a sense of doubt.

'What was that?'

The relief and joy were certain, but what followed was strange.

Did I... Did I feel such an emotion at that time?

"..."

Yuder suddenly opened his eyes with a cold shiver. It felt like he'd been unconscious for a very long time, but it didn't seem to have been that long, judging from the corpse of Pethuamet that he saw as soon as he opened his eyes. He tried to lift his arm in frustration with the dark, blurring view, but someone gently restrained him. Instead of the foul stench that had been stinging his nose, a familiar scent enveloped his body.

"...don't ...move."

He couldn't hear properly due to the deafening in his ears, but it was enough to fully wake him up, even just with a part of the sentence. Yuder blinked to see the face of the person supporting his body more clearly. After a few attempts, he finally saw someone's face in his view.

Was it the first light that shone in the darkness?

Yuder lost his senses momentarily as he looked at Kishiar's face, whom he was seeing after three days. The feeling of reality that he thought he had regained the moment he woke up seemed to be drifting away again.

"...Commander?"

He wasn't sure if he could be heard, given that even his own voice didn't sound clear, but a gentle squeeze from the hand that was holding his indicated an affirmative response.

"How did you..."

"That's not important right now."

A low voice descended from above his head. It was then that Yuder finally saw the wave-like emotion rippling in Kishiar's red eyes. As he quickly averted his gaze due to the chill creeping up his back, he finally managed to take in the surrounding landscape.

They were inside the massive trap that Yuder had set to kill Pethuamet. He could vaguely see the faces of the people sticking their heads out from the cliff and shouting something. Small bundles of light were floating around them, indicating that everything seemed to have settled down.

Yuder cast another glance towards the body of Pethuamet, whom he had slain. He had been unable to let down his guard for fear of the unexpected, even after severing the monster's tongue, but upon seeing the motionless form riddled with holes, he finally felt assured that he had truly killed it.

Pethuamet was dead. In this lifetime, Yuder Aile had truly succeeded in killing that nightmare of a monster.

Though his body was in a battered state, he had not suffered any injuries severe enough to result in dismemberment, and neither his Cavalry comrades nor any other people had been harmed. The only thing that was shattered was not the villages or cities in the western border, but the Great Sarain Forest.

And, in front of his eyes, Kishiar, too, was utterly unscathed this time. The moment he realized this, a refreshing feeling seeped in, as if he had resolved a long-held regret and ambition.

"...Are you smiling?"

Above his head, Kishiar mumbled in disbelief.

"Can you really afford to smile in such a state?"

Had he been smiling? As he could not see his own expression, he wasn't certain whether he was truly smiling or not. However, the fact that he felt good was true, so he didn't respond.

"You kept... your promise for sure."

As he shifted the topic, Kishiar let out a deep sigh.

"Indeed."

Unexpected things did happen, but... Along with his low voice, an emotional touch caressed Yuder's body, and he was hugged close. He was smaller than Kishiar, but still he was a man, considerably tall compared to others. Seeing himself held so lightly, like a child, he strangely felt the reality of Kishiar's return.

But while he did feel the reality, the emotion of not wanting to be held was another matter entirely.

"I can walk on my own..."

"Really? If you can lift your hand by yourself, I'll let you go."

"..."

Yuder tried to muster strength in his arm. However, only his fingertips twitched a bit; his body wouldn't follow his will at all. Kishiar, watching him, let out another deep sigh. It felt as if he was holding back from saying something he desperately wanted to say.

"Did you... leave everyone behind?"

Yuder decided to change the topic again. However, strangely, Kishiar's expression only hardened further at his question, not softening at all.

"It seems like that's not what we should be worrying about right now. Is there anywhere that hurts?"

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

"So, you're saying it's serious enough that you don't even know where it hurts."

With the curt reply, the fingers supporting his body tightened and then relaxed. Yuder suddenly remembered the distinct imprint of five fingers on the door of the Cavalry Commander's room.

'That must have been left by Kishiar.'

Despite possessing such immense strength, the arms of the man holding him only exuded a sense of firm security. It felt slightly strange to be unafraid while in the arms of another, unable to resist.

'No, it's not just being unafraid, it's as if...'

"Why are you looking at me like that? Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm not."

Yuder shook his head to shake off the strange feeling. But the moment he met the worried, red gaze looking at him, a part of his memories from before he woke up suddenly surfaced.

'...Ah.'

A strange feeling had been tugging at his heart, a pain that was unbearable despite the refreshing and pleasant emotions he was feeling. He finally seemed to understand where this feeling was heading.

'Was it Kishiar?'

The fact that he had once harbored such emotions for none other than Kishiar La Orr startled him. His mind was perplexed by the revelation, but his heart quivered with a marvelous sensation, as if it had rediscovered a long-lost piece.

During his moment of mild confusion, Kishiar, likely discerning his peculiar state, halted his steps with a frown creasing his forehead.

"It seems your condition is not well."

"No, it's not..."

Before he could even deny it, Kishiar reached out a hand, shielding his eyes. A white light poured from his palm, and then, it was truly as if he had blacked out.

The surroundings were incredibly noisy. Unable to keep his eyes shut any longer, he gritted his teeth and forced them open. The clamor grew louder instantly, finally morphing into recognizable voices that resonated in his ears.

"Yuder. Are you conscious?"

"...Kanna?"

He turned his head, but despite hearing her voice, he couldn't see his familiar comrade's face. Something seemed to be obstructing his view. Stunned, he tried to rub his eyes, but someone promptly grabbed his hand, stopping him.

"No, don't touch your face. We've bandaged it."

"Why..."

"You completely drenched yourself in the monster's fluid. Why on earth would you do that?"

Kanna's voice shook with mixed emotions.

"Do you realize you were injured the most, even though you weren't alone?"

"...Is it severe?"

"You need to ask that?"

A slapping sensation came from the vicinity of his right shoulder. It seemed to come from anger but didn't hurt in the slightest.

"Everything from your head to toe is a mess! Your eyes and ears are severely affected, you've broken ribs, and they said you were drained of all strength, and, and...!"

"That's enough for me to hear."

Interrupting her, he exhaled. Despite the news of his severe condition, he felt oddly untroubled.

"...Where's the Commander?"

"The Commander is..."

Kanna seemed ready to respond, but instead, fell silent.

"You don't need to know about that. Rest more."

"Kanna?"

Her statement felt less like a simple delay and more like an ominous omen.

'I killed Pethuamet, so why is the environment still so chaotic?'

Familiar sounds reached him from somewhere. Shouts. Groans. And... explosions.

'...Explosions?'

With a blank expression, he moved his lips and found his voice.

"Hasn't it ended?"

Turning

Chapter 286

"Hasn't it ended?"

"No. Calm down, Yuder."

Kanna strained to hold back Yuder, who was attempting to hastily move.

"How long was I unconscious? Where are we?"

"We're at the Western Mage Union's base. The Commander brought you here, and it hasn't been long since Priest Lusan finished your treatment."

That meant the battle with Pethuamet had ended just a few hours ago. A dreadful thought crossed his mind, wondering if Pethuamet, whom he thought he had killed, hadn't actually died completely. Even if that wasn't the case, there was still the possibility that the remaining monsters could cause problems.

'What's going on? What about Kishiar...'

The moment he bit his lip, Kanna responded as if reading his thoughts with a firm voice.

"Don't worry, the reason isn't what you think. The noise outside is because the mages and our side are arguing."

"Arguing? Why?"

"Why indeed?"

Kanna sighed, stroking the back of Yuder's hand.

"The Commander ordered that even when you wake, you must not go outside. So you mustn't move from here until Priest Lusan comes back."

Yuder fell silent for a moment before turning his head toward where Kanna was likely situated.

"Is he... angry?"

"Wouldn't it be odd if he wasn't?"

"I'm also angry, you know. I might not look like it, but I'm really mad." Kanna mumbled, her voice barely audible as she stared at Yuder's hand, her words hinting at concerns for what was to come.

"...Anyway, one thing's for sure, I've never seen the Commander's face like that when he brought you..."

Yuder couldn't see Kanna's blue eyes looking out into the distance. Clearing her thoughts, Kanna gazed at the thick bandages covering Yuder's eyes, letting out a long sigh.

"...But Yuder, aren't you curious about what we've been doing for the past three days? A lot of surprising things happened, don't you want to hear?"

Despite knowing that her words were aimed to divert his attention, Yuder couldn't help but respond.

"What happened?"

"Well, Prince Ejain... he awakened."

All sounds from outside that were reaching his ears disappeared in his mind at that moment. Yuder felt the silence, clearly waiting for his reaction, and licked his lips in disbelief.

"Awakened?"

"Yes. The same awakening as us. What, not surprised?"

Of course, he was surprised. However, not because Ejain had awakened, but because of the timing of his awakening.

Prince Ejain should have awakened later, not now. How he awakened in his past life was not publicly known, but it was widely known that the lackluster succession dispute ended abruptly with Ejain's awakening.

So, even if the timing of his awakening differed from his previous life, he had expected it to occur after he returned to Nelarn, not during his time with the Cavalry. His mind spun quickly.

"No, I'm also surprised. How did it happen?"

"It was when we arrived at the location where his followers were waiting. The number of people was far fewer than the prince originally stated, and it didn't feel right. As expected, the traitors attacked the prince's followers and were hiding there for a surprise attack."

The traitors were quickly subdued by the Cavalry, but a few managed to escape into the woods. Prince Ejain decided to take upon himself the arduous task of questioning them personally, then ending their lives.

However, during a brief moment of vulnerability, one of the captured traitors charged at the prince, intending to kill him. It was a hair-raising moment of deadly danger, yet a miracle happened then. Prince Ejain had awakened.

"I was truly surprised. I've never seen such an ability. Do you know what it was?"

"No."

Although he knew, Yuder merely shook his head in silence.

"A bright light burst forth. When I opened my eyes after shielding them, the man who was charging to attack was dead, and there was something around the prince, radiating a mysterious aura. At first, I thought it was just a mass of light, but when I looked closer... it was stone."

Listening to Kanna's astonished voice, Yuder gave a slight nod.

'As I thought.'

Yuder felt a slight relief at the realization that Ejain's ability, which he was familiar with, had manifested in the same way in this life as well.

In his previous life, Ejain was known as the Silver King followed by the Six Stars. That title was bestowed upon him because of the six masses of light that would circle around him, protecting their master. Very few knew the fact that inside the brilliantly radiant light were simply ordinary-looking stones.

Yuder wouldn't have known this either if he hadn't met Ejain personally. Perhaps because he thought it wasn't very impressive, Ejain himself didn't widely publicize this fact either.

Still, Ejain used those masses of light to exert a more powerful defensive power than anyone else. After his awakening, there was no one who could physically injure him. That was the very reason he was also known as the Guardian of the Barrier.

'Perhaps the Ejain of the previous life awakened due to similar reasons.'

It felt quite ironic that the only weapon the Prince, who had been thrown into life-threatening danger countless times, managed to acquire was a few ordinary stones. No matter how much they shone, in the end, they were just stones.

"Everyone was surprised. Even the prince himself was so startled, he didn't know what to do. But we still had to catch the remaining traitors, so we went after them... It turned out there was no need for us to chase them. Some people had already taken care of them."

Kanna's voice fell low.

"As it turns out, they were Awakeners staying at the Star of Nagran outpost in the Great Sarain Forest."

Yuder jerked his head up. The mention of the Star of Nagran, which he had momentarily forgotten in his dazed state since woken up, brought back his memories.

"If you mention Star of Nagran, I think... I've seen it too."

"Yeah. I've heard. The people you met were from Star of Nagran, and so were the ones we met. Thanks to them, we were able to return without being too late."

"What do you mean? ...Did we do more than just encounter Star of Nagran?"

"Don't be surprised. We've been to the village where those people live. So, to be precise, we visited one of the outposts of Star of Nagran that I mentioned before."

"What?"

They had been to an outpost created by Star of Nagran? How did that happen? The more he heard, the more questions he had. When he tilted his head in confusion, Kanna let out a pleased snort, as if she had gotten the reaction she wanted.

"I told you it would be surprising. Who could have expected the subordinates of that person, who almost got killed by the traitors while on the mission to escort the prince from the Great Sarain Forest, were rescued and staying with those people?"

Kanna continued the tale, jesting now but expressing how she had genuinely broken out in a cold sweat back then.

The Cavalry members stood in stunned silence as they surveyed the bodies scattered before them. The man who had just used his bare hands to impale and kill the last traitor, now discarded the corpse and furrowed his brow at them. Despite being dressed like an ordinary huntsman, he couldn't hide his grotesquely hardened fingers, which seemed as solid as iron. Kanna suspected that he was undoubtedly an Awakener.

"What's this? More of them? Are you with those scum too?"

"On the contrary. We were chasing them."

"Oh... I see? Our folks said those guys are terribly bad news. Hmm. I don't know who to believe."

The man gestured dismissively toward his companions standing behind him. Every single one of them appeared to be severely injured and gazed warily at the Cavalry members.

'Those injured don't seem to be Awakeners... What kind of group are they?'

In the midst of her confusion, the tension spiked sharply. A moment later, Prince Ejain, who had appeared with a pale face, opened his eyes wide and his mouth hung agape.

"...You are?"

"Wait, the Prince?"

The injured all exclaimed in unison.

"So, the person you've been waiting for has finally arrived?"

The Awakener casually shrugged, cupping his ear as if straining to hear their response. They didn't head towards the pile of bodies in the lodge, but instead towards a village the man guided them to, where a few more of Ejain's surviving subordinates were still lingering.

"Well... Normally they would fuss about it, but since the guests we worked hard to save were waiting for this person, and since you're all Awakeners, I guess they'll let it slide this time. But, everything you've seen here must remain a secret."

Initially, they didn't believe it, but indeed there was a village where the man led them. The man guiding them revealed a knowing smile, as if understanding their shock at discovering a perfectly ordinary village hidden deep within the dense and gloomy Great Sarain Forest.

"No one knows we live here. It was quite an effort to hide it with our abilities. Things are getting a little dicey as the number of people increases, but... unless those distant mages get involved, a little exposure is not a big deal in my opinion. As long as the village isn't revealed, anyone we come across just assumes we're nomads and moves on."

The man speculated that the Cavalry members were followers of Ejain. Ejain, meeting his subordinates whom he never thought he would see again, blushed at the corners of his eyes a few times during their conversation.

Turning

Chapter 287

Ejain generously gave away several gold buttons pinned inside his clothing to the hunter-garbed Awakener, who had offered assistance to his subordinates without asking for anything in return. He expressed sincere gratitude, but the man refused to accept such tokens, saying that he merely lent a hand out of sympathy for their story of near-death betrayal by their former comrades. However, upon Ejain's repeated insistence, the man reluctantly accepted the buttons, his face etched with discomfort.

"Ah, goodness. You insist so much... Aren't these items more necessary for distinguished folks like you, who have a long journey ahead? Anyhow, feel free to continue your discussions. I'll be outside."

Despite his grotesquely twisted finger-like appendages and scar-ridden face, the Awakener was genuinely simple and compassionate. After he left the room, Ejain could finally comfortably recount to his subordinates the ordeals he had gone through. His men were shocked at the tale of treachery they heard, and were even more astonished upon learning of his Awakening, unable to hide their surprise as they shared in laughter and tears.

As they conversed, Kanna, who hid her face within the hood of her cloak, secretly used her abilities, under the direction of Kishiar. From various corners of their dwelling, the genuine worries of Ejain's subordinates that had filled their minds, undoubtedly formed data and flowed into her head. Only then was she able to feel somewhat relieved.

"I'm not sure how those who despise Awakeners will feel once they learn that I've Awakened. If you feel it is difficult to serve me because of this, there's no need for you to return to our homeland with me."

"But Your Highness, our views on the Awakeners have completely changed since we arrived here. We didn't understand when you suggested adopting a policy similar to the Orr Empire to accept the Awakeners. But now we do."

Ejain had long advocated for Nelarn to adopt a policy akin to the Orr Empire to include Awakeners in their ranks, but his proposition had never been accepted until now. However, he had now become an Awakener, and his close aides had also experienced the power of the Awakeners. If they could safely return home, much would likely change.

As she observed this, Kanna pondered on the Awakeners who were still ostracized and not acknowledged by society. Although she was lucky to have Awakened an ability that went unnoticed

unless she revealed it herself, which even allowed her to join the Cavalry, there were far more who were not so fortunate.

Take this village, for example. Through the information she gleaned on the way, Kanna was astounded to realize that this village was an outpost of the Star of Nagran. Although she had assumed it would be a dangerous place as it was one of the organization's bases, the actual first impression of the outpost was nothing more than an ordinary village surrounded by a dense forest.

Kishiar, who had secretly received a report on the true nature of the village from Kanna, fell into deep thought. He concluded that they should slip away as inconspicuously as possible once Ejain's business was settled.

However, things didn't proceed as smoothly as anticipated. Just as they were wrapping up their conversation, an unusual sound came from outside. Startled by the noise of several people rushing by and distant shouts, Kanna peeked outside, only to be stopped by the stern-faced host.

"It's probably nothing. But you folks shouldn't show your faces. I'll go check it out."

"What's happening?"

Ejain, who was also alarmed by the noise from outside during their conversation, displayed his anxiety. His subordinates responded to him.

"Perhaps a monster had appeared on the outskirts of the village, or more likely, they had brought ordinary folk like us that they'd found in the Great Sarain Forest."

"Does that happen often?"

"During the few days we stayed in this village, monsters continued to appear, causing quite a commotion. But they say no one was killed or seriously injured. Remarkable people, really."

"So... they often save people like you and bring them to the village?"

"More often than you might think. There are quite a few who escaped from being captives in foreign countries or from the burgeoning slave trade. Many of the Awakeners in the village have a strong sense of justice, so they couldn't just stand by when they saw people in such conditions. However..."

One of Ejain's subordinates hesitated for a moment before continuing with a gloomy face.

"Not all are virtuous, of course. As the village, a sanctuary carefully hidden away, becomes more crowded with ordinary people, conflicts among them appear to be on the rise. We've seen the Awakeners who saved our lives argue fiercely with other Awakeners in the village."

Even setting aside the fact that this place was a base for the Star of Nagran, it was inevitable that internal strife would break out in a village established for the Awakeners who had been persecuted to live in peace. Kanna's gaze shifted directly to Kishiar and his companions, feeling the complexity of their thoughts passing over their faces.

"This is no ordinary situation."

Before long, the host returned with a serious look on his face and addressed Ejain's subordinates.

"I went to check out reports of a monster, but it turns out that armed men had gathered in large numbers searching for some guy who was picked up by our villagers this morning, like you."

Why on earth were there so many reckless people venturing into the Great Sarain Forest at such a dangerous time? He cursed and then sighed deeply before continuing.

"They're still prowling around the village, but their leader seems to be quite formidable. I'm not sure how this will turn out. The leader looks like he's from the Southern countries... I wonder what brought a Southerner this far north..."

For a moment, Kanna thought of Nathan Zuckerman, Kishiar's adjutant, who had the distinctive red skin of a Southerner. It seemed she wasn't the only one who had this thought as Kishiar, who had been silently observing the situation until now, finally stepped forward.

"A person found near here this morning... Who is he?"

"We're not sure. All we know is that he was injured, fleeing through the dangerous forest, and we felt sorry for him."

The man they had rescued had regained consciousness not long ago. As soon as he woke up, he offered to give them as many precious gems as they wanted if they would hide him here for a while. By his clothing and appearance, he was clearly not from the Empire. Unlike the refugees or slaves who had fled here, he was wearing expensive clothes and wouldn't say anything about himself. Until new intruders showed up, there had been a heated debate in the village over this mysterious man.

"We were able to decide quickly to treat you and send you on your way because you told us your situation immediately. But with him... we have to be cautious. And now this..."

"Didn't he give his name? What does he look like?"

"Hmm... Benn, or maybe Jenn. I think that's what he said his name was when he woke up. As for his looks... all I remember is that he had brown hair. But why do you keep asking?"

At those words, a rumbling noise came from Ejain and his subordinates. Prince Ejain, with his stern face, rose and addressed Kishiar.

"...It seems we are too late. No, we are certainly too late."

"Coincidentally, I was thinking the same. Then, it would be clear who the trackers outside the village are."

Things started to take a turn, contrary to the intentions of the host who had been trying to conceal them from prying eyes and send them off. Originally, they were supposed to arrive at the mountain hut with Prince Ejain, and wait for the Peletta Knights, who would follow a bit later with the traitors.

However, due to the unexpected presence of the traitors who betrayed Ejain's men and the outpost of the Star of Nagran near the hut, everything was drastically altered. They ended up confronting other Awakeners from the outpost, who had quickly gathered from the center of the village.

"Who are you? Who the hell are you to know the ones who came out there, the one picked up at dawn, and the ones who had been laid down and treated for days? What do you know about us? Could you be the ones sent by the Lord of Tainu?"

Looking at the Awakeners with their faces filled with suspicion, Kanna broke out in a cold sweat.

'What should I do....'

Even if she denied it, they didn't seem likely to believe her. The look of fear in their eyes, suspecting that they were sent by the lord of the western metropolis to kill them, was gradually turning into anger. Even if a fight broke out, they didn't think they were outmatched, but they were at a disadvantage due to the number of injured on their side.

Despite sensing Kanna's anxious gaze, Kishiar confidently stepped forward in front of the others...

"So, what happened then?"

Yuder, seizing the momentary pause in Kanna's story, asked anxiously. A faint chuckle came from the invisible darkness beyond.

"What do you think you would have done?"

"If it were me..."

If Yuder Aile had been there and in the same situation as Kishiar, he would have first subdued the ominous Star of Nagran Awakeners all at once, cooled down a bit, and then proposed to talk.

"...I would have created a situation for conversation and then started talking."

As Kanna gave her short response while collecting thoughts she shouldn't know, she burst out into a louder laugh.

"That's exactly what the Commander did."

"Huh?"

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"That's exactly what the Commander did."

"Huh?"

"The Commander also did it that way."

Kanna, repeating herself once more, soon explained what Kishiar had done.

"As soon as someone as tall as Kishiar stepped forward, they became incredibly tense. Even the Second Prince of Nelarn seemed worried about a potential conflict, and he attempted to take off the cloak he used to hide his face, to explain himself. It was then that someone misunderstood the movement and attacked by mistake..."

"Who?"

Upon hearing the question from Yuder, calm in tone but certainly not in intent, Kanna blinked.

"Ah... It was someone who can control sand. They were clumsy in controlling their powers and were abandoned by their family. But don't worry. Neither of them were hurt."

Only after hearing this, did his momentarily chilled brain return to its normal state.

"That's fortunate."

According to Kanna, Kishiar blocked the attack aimed at him and Ejain in a blink of an eye. As the fine but sharp sand particles lost their momentum and spilled onto the ground, everyone in the village felt a crushing sense of pressure. Even a child crying in the distance instantly ceased their wailing, such was the impressive force. Even Kanna, who had been observing Kishiar for a long time within their group, couldn't fully comprehend what he had done.

With eyes meeting the frozen gazes of those who had collapsed from the pressure, he gave Ejain a slow nod. The Prince, having received the signal to withdraw, hesitated before slowly backing away. Then, a low voice emerged from within Kishiar's cloak.

"I apologize for employing such crude methods, but we're running out of time to uphold our promise. Will you all stay seated and listen to what I have to say?..."

His language was far too elegant for the situation. Ordinary people couldn't fully comprehend the immense power he had unleashed, but the Awakeners were different. They instinctively understood that this overwhelming force was just a small part of what Kishiar possessed, and that no one here could defeat him.

Will you listen to me? While it seemed like in the form of a request, it was nothing short of a soft command.

In the silence that made it seem like the entire village had disappeared, Kishiar briefly explained that they had no connection to the Lord of Tainu.

"We are aiding the Western Mage Union, and the Knights stationed outside the village are our comrades. Our relationship with the distinguished foreign guests here was formed by chance. We are merely helping them return home safely after crossing the treacherous Great Sarain Forest. Some traitors showed up and complicated things, but we'd appreciate it if you knew that we are the ones who want to leave this place as soon as possible."

The Awakeners in the village had silently understood that the subordinates of Prince Ejain and the injured who arrived at dawn were not from the Empire. Everyone knew about the complex border situation with foreign lands in the Great Sarain Forest, and the name of the Western Mage Union had a potent effect.

Although the mages of the Western Mage Union didn't know about the village, the Awakeners, who had been evading them and establishing their base, knew better than anyone about the poor relationship between the mages and the Lord of Tainu. They had been the hidden neighbors who had been observing up close how much trouble the mages had to endure to handle the monsters appearing in the Great Sarain Forest, in place of the Lord of Tainu.

As the year unfolded, rumors had spread that the mages, unable to hold back any longer, had finally erupted in a grand fight against the lord of Tainu. If someone had called upon others with powers to aid them from another place, the logical conclusion was clear.

"So, you were... mercenaries."

No one responded to the words spat out by someone. The Awakeners believed this silence to be an affirmation. The atmosphere rapidly deflated as they surmised that Kishiar and the Cavalry were mercenary Awakeners, hired by the Western Mage Union and noblemen from other countries.

Watching the scene, Kanna breathed a deep sigh of relief inwardly.

'Impressive...'

The few words Kishiar uttered seemed quite simple, but they were in fact brimming with insight into the hidden thoughts of the Awakeners living in this village. They didn't dislike the mages of the Western Mage Union, who were their enemy's enemy, and sympathized with other Awakeners who possessed the same powers. They regained their calm swiftly, realizing that they, who had lived ordinary lives until they awakened, had no affiliation with the group they were currently with.

"So... you're saying you'll leave the village as soon as we hand over the wounded who came in this morning?"

"That's correct."

"You should have said so from the start."

Kishiar provided proof of his claim right there in front of the Awakeners. The group roaming around with menacing swords near the village turned out to be the Peletta Knights. Worried about encountering assassins, the Knights had quickened their pace into the Great Sarain Forest, lost Jenn in a battle against a peculiar monster, and were in pursuit.

Nathan Zuckerman and the Peletta Knights, who unexpectedly ran into their lord in an unexpected place, were surprised, but quickly reassured the village's Awakeners, matching Kishiar's pace and playing along with his words. Information exchanged rapidly among them while the Awakeners left the space, having agreed to hand Jenn back over to Kishiar.

"Oh, Nathan. I didn't expect you to be caught off guard enough to lose that traitor."

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but we were slowed down by constant monster attacks as soon as we entered the Great Sarain Forest. The traitor managed to escape in the confusion of the battle, and one of our company got injured trying to stop him."

Even for a Swordmaster like Nathan Zuckerman, it wasn't easy to deal with peculiar monsters while rescuing many people. The worry that Kishiar's group might get hurt by assassins chasing Ejain also contributed significantly to the Knights' anxiety.

As Nathan Zuckerman sighed in relief after seeing his unharmed lord, Ejain and his subordinates came across another subordinate, Melbon, who was injured while trying to stop the fleeing Jenn. Upon meeting his lord after the discovery that he was a spy sent from Nelarn's greatest enemy, Durban, Melbon remained silent for a while.

"Melbon... why did you stop Jenn instead of running away with him?"

"Didn't the Prince say he would decide Jenn's fate once he returned to Nelarn? Although I am a criminal, I didn't want him to witness Jenn, who has no shame, attempting to defy his final command. I failed, but still..."

Kanna was one of the few who read the sincerity in Melbon's confession of his loyalty to Prince Ejain. The prince looked at his former subordinate, lying severely wounded, with a complex expression and sighed. Melbon, guessing the meaning behind that sigh, lowered his head in a barely audible voice.

"I heard... you've awakened. You've gained power, so now no one can harm you, Your Highness. Forget about me. And... congratulations."

"Indeed. You too... try not to die before we reach Nelarn."

Melbon's eyes widened at those words. The underlings of Ejain, who had been wearing gloomy expressions behind him, also displayed similar surprised expressions. In the short span of time, Kanna could sense a significant change in Prince Ejain's heart. It wasn't information she could discern through her powers.

Then, the Awakeners brought in the injured man who had been lying down. There were clear signs of a struggle, as if he had anticipated a bleak future. As expected, it was Jenn who had fled, and Prince Ejain showed no more merciful reluctance to the man who had betrayed him twice.

"Now, it's just a matter of us and them each going our separate ways."

"Yes. If we want to return before tomorrow passes, we'll have to be quite busy."

When Kanna, feeling a bit complicated but light-hearted, spoke to Kishiar, he gave a matter-of-fact response.

"But why before tomorrow? It seems like it would be very difficult to return to the Western Mage Union's base by then."

Suddenly curious, Kanna asked only to meet the piercing red gaze beneath the brim of his cloak. She wondered if she had asked a question she shouldn't have. Fortunately, the returned voice did not seem to show any displeasure at her question.

"I promised I would return by then."

"A promise... Ah, you mentioned that earlier. But with whom?"

Kishiar did not respond as swiftly as before to that question. A breeze blew through, causing the cloth that covered his face to flutter. His lips beneath his revealed nose seemed to form a slightly different smile than before, but as soon as she opened her eyes, the sight vanished like a mirage.

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What was the meaning behind that fleeting expression worn by Kishiar, who had always seemed so calm and composed? The image of his face was somehow indelibly etched in Kanna's mind, causing her to quietly withdraw.

Afterward, matters swiftly concluded. As his subordinates were preparing to leave, Prince Ejain exchanged a brief farewell with Kishiar near the village entrance.

He had planned to return home as soon as he left the village formed by the Star of Nagran, but instead he decided to stay a little longer at the hut, his original destination, for his still wounded subordinates. A strange emotion fluttered across the face of the young prince as he disclosed this plan.

"Are you sure about staying here longer, given the dangers of this place?"

"The route home from here passes through a third country, so the risks are minimal. Furthermore, I am... well, it still feels unreal, but I've become an Awakener, haven't I?"

As Prince Ejain spoke, he gazed at the shining stones circling around him with an unfamiliar look.

"These things are my protection, it seems... it puts my mind at ease. I don't feel as anxious as before. I think protecting those who chose to stay with me is more important now than rushing home, even if it means accepting some sacrifices."

“I feel ashamed. I was going to whip others into leaving immediately.”

“No. Our positions are different, aren't they? If I were in your shoes, I would have done the same.”

Kishiar's jest did not draw laughter. Instead, Prince Ejain replied with solemnity, his gaze becoming resolute.

“Regardless, it will take a bit longer to return home than expected, but rest assured, I'll fulfill our promise as soon as I get back. I've made arrangements to ensure the first matter can be handled, even if something happens to me.”

“The fulfillment of the promise isn't urgent, take your time. I was worried because many are startled by sudden awakenings, but I'm glad to see you've regained your composure.”

“That's probably due to your assistant, my new friend, sharing his words with me.”

The atmosphere surrounding Kishiar subtly shifted at that moment. After a pause, a faint voice emerged from beneath the brim of a concealing cloak.

“Is that so?”

“He once asked me if I thought I'd be followed by more people once I suddenly acquired a great power and shook off all the trouble around me. It was a shocking question for me. Embarrassingly, I had never doubted that part before.”

At first, the meaning of that enigmatic phrase eluded him. But in a situation where he had nothing to do other than suppress his presence and move around, he had no choice but to persistently ponder that distressing thought to escape his mental agony.

Then, Ejain had an epiphany. Had he ever thought about himself from such diverse angles before? He had pondered countless times about the future of Nelarn, the crises that were immediately in front of him, the talents he couldn't obtain, and the powers he wanted but couldn't get. However, he had never purely gazed into his own inner self before. That moment felt as if his eyes were being opened.

“In retrospect, he might have wanted to tell me that the crucial factor in changing my surroundings was not power, but myself. That was the first thought that came to me when I awakened. It was as if he knew this would happen and told me in advance... His insight was truly astonishing.”

Kanna, who had been listening to their conversation not far away, was deeply startled by those words. She had seen Yuder speaking with Prince Ejain on several occasions, but she never imagined they had exchanged such words. Moreover, friends? Honestly, she found it harder to believe that Yuder Aile was a friend of Prince Ejain than that the Prince had become friends with a Cavalry member.

Despite her bewilderment, the conversation between the two continued.

“Through this imperial visit, I have received immense help from His Majesty the Emperor of Orr Empire, the Commander, and a new friend. The people of Nelarn will never forget this favor. The next time we get in touch, I will repay you with good news so you do not regret our alliance.”

Prince Ejain said his farewells with a gentler expression than when they first met, and turned around. His subordinates and the attendant Melbon, who had been waiting at a distance, formally greeted him. They bowed with sincere thanks toward the Cavalry members, then turned away. The Cavalry members watched their departure with mixed emotions. It was the moment when the first mission that had brought them all the way here was finally accomplished.

“Afterwards, we parted with the Peletta Knights and returned here. Everyone was in good spirits up until that point.”

Despite the incessant marching with little rest, not one of them expressed discontent. It was because their commander had led from the front. It didn't take long for all the members to notice that, unlike when they arrived with Kishiar, they were in quite a hurry this time.

Kanna, who noticed that his gaze often lingered to the east where their destination lay, secretly smiled. The Commander who never lost his composure and smile was in a hurry because he was worried about those around him, no doubt about it.

'When we return, I should ask Yuder if he really became friends with the Second Prince of Nelarn. Ah, and I should also tell him about the awakening. That would surprise Yuder, wouldn't it?'

She realized something was wrong when they were nearing the base where the Western Mage Union stayed.

“...Commander. This is the fifth one.”

Gakane murmured, glancing around. In front of him lay the corpse of a monster torn apart by a shadow clone. The monster, an unidentified purple creature, was small in size, but its thorny tail was exceptionally long and large.

“It feels odd to see such weak monsters appearing this frequently. I apologize if I’m over-worrying...”

“No. It’s not over-worrying, it's accurate judgment.”

Kishiar responded, looking down at the ground soaked with black bodily fluid.

“I have a bad feeling about this. Can everyone pick up the pace a bit?”

“Yes.”

The Cavalry members quickened their tired steps. Just before they entered the base, they encountered mages struggling to handle monsters identical to the ones they had defeated on their way.

When the Eldore siblings smashed the monster with a giant arm they had modified, the mages slumped to the ground with exhausted faces. They had no energy even to utter words of thanks.

“What’s the situation? Have there been abnormal monster appearances again?”

“No, it’s not that. Something worse... A calamity-like creature has appeared.”

Watching the mages with terror in their eyes, as if recalling something, the Cavalry members exchanged glances. The icy feeling that brushed down their spines marked the moment Kishiar strode forward and entered the depths of the base.

"My goodness! You've all returned safely..."

The moment they entered the last remaining building, the bloodstained Lusan rushed out to greet them. However, the other person they had expected to be at his side was nowhere to be seen.

"Priest Lusan. Where is Yuder Aile?"

Having briefly surveyed the surroundings, Kishiar asked in a cold tone. Priest Lusan shook his head regretfully.

"He... He went out to handle the monster."

"A monster?"

"A strange monster we've never seen before has appeared. It's said to grow larger and stronger each time it's attacked..."

Lusan tried his best to briefly explain everything he had seen and heard so far. Despite stumbling over his words due to his lack of eloquence, Kishiar did not rush him and listened patiently until the end.

"So, Yuder went out to defeat the monster and other mages followed. I've been staying here, protecting this place and treating those who've been injured..."

The anxiety in Lusan's trembling eyes deepened the unease the Cavalry members were feeling.

"If only you'd come a little earlier, you could have gone with them..."

At that moment, Kanna felt a shiver down her spine. Looking around, it seemed she was not the only one to feel that way; all her comrades wore shocked expressions as well. At the end of that chilling sensation was their Commander.

A moment later, an emotionless voice flowed out from beneath the hood of his black cloak.

"All Cavalry members, stand by here and keep an eye on the surroundings."

"..."

"Determine what the mages upstairs are doing and what situations have arisen based on the story we've just heard. Kanna Wand will be responsible for gathering information."

"...A-ah, understood."

Though she tried not to stammer, she felt an icy tingle that froze her lips and overwhelmed her. As Kanna gritted her teeth, Kishiar's gaze shifted upstairs.

"And."

He gave his final command to Lusan.

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"...Reserve your strength, Priest Lusan, for the one I will bring soon."

And then, he disappeared as quickly as a blink. The Cavalry members only managed to collect themselves and breathe properly after he was gone.

"Wh-where did the Commander go? Don't tell me he went to find Yuder alone?"

"Probably. He did say to Priest Lusan to conserve energy for the one he would bring..."

In response to Emun's question, Gakane mumbled. Even the usually amiable Gakane struggled to maintain composure in this situation, his expression stiff.

"Kanna, are we really not going after him?"

"A monster that grows stronger the more it's attacked, what is that all about? No matter how powerful Yuder is, how could he defeat it alone?"

"I don't know..."

Kanna answered blankly towards the Eldore siblings huddled next to her.

"But we should do what he asked and wait for now."

Yuder was undeniably the strongest member amongst the 330 Cavalry members. Everyone here had received help for their ability development from Yuder. Kanna trusted Yuder's strength as much as, or even more than, she trusted Kishiar.

But strangely, she couldn't shake off the unsettling feeling.

And that unease became a reality a moment later with a massive earthquake that seemed to tear apart the Great Sarain Forest.

"That earthquake... I truly thought the world was ending. I still can't believe that you caused it alone. When the Commander brought you back..."

After the entire story, Yuder felt the trembling of Kanna's small hand holding his own.

"We thought you were dead."

"...Kanna."

"Listen, don't ever do that again."

With a voice choking back emotion, Kanna pleaded.

"Promise me here. You won't do it again. No matter how dangerous it seems for others, you won't step in alone."

If it was anyone else asking, he might've agreed just to reassure them. But Kanna had the ability to discern lies and truths hidden within words if she wished.

'So that's why she kept holding my hand.'

Kanna tightened her grip on his hand as Yuder remained silent.

"...Won't you promise?"

"I'll try."

"...That's the best you can do, huh."

'I see.' Kanna gave a short reply and, letting out a sigh, she released his hand.

"But remember this. You only have one life. No matter how strong you are, death means the end. Have you ever considered those around you?"

Without realizing it, Yuder found himself smiling faintly. Indeed, her words were true. No matter how strong you are, death is the end. No amount of achievement, wealth, or power can accompany you in death.

And no one knew this better than himself.

"I know."

"No, what do you know? You don't know anything."

As if all her previous cheerfulness was a lie, Kanna retorted coldly and hit Yuder's shoulder once more.

"I'm furious that I only realized now that you're such a fool. If I knew, I would have vehemently opposed when the Commander said he was leaving you behind."

Yuder had wished for that too. But he stayed quiet, fearing that saying so would only make Kanna more upset.

"...I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. What are you apologizing for when you can't even promise to stay out of trouble?"

After saying so, Kanna fell silent, unable to overcome her sense of distress. A few moments later, Yuder heard a rustling noise from her at his side.

"What does this look like?"

"...A sword?"

"Right. Your sword. When the Commander brought you here, he didn't manage to bring it along, so someone else brought it later. But... touch this part here."

Kanna guided Yuder's hand to touch a certain spot. His numb fingers caught a rough, lengthy string. But as soon as he touched it, it crumbled and broke off piece by piece.

"Do you remember the red string that was originally attached to your sword? Luckily the sword is intact, but that string and the sheath are completely ruined. What you just touched was the last remaining piece of the string."

Yuder silently focused on the coarse sensation at his fingertips. This string was a gift from Enon, who had forced it on him, saying it would help steady his energy. He had kept it tied to his sword ever since.

It wouldn't matter if he made a new sheath, but despite its worn-out appearance, the string had never been damaged by fire or water before, so he couldn't easily guess what it meant for it to have broken in this way.

"You were in a very dangerous fight for your sword to end up like this. Do you understand?"

"..."

Listening to Kanna's sharp voice, he touched the spot where the string had been tied for a long while.

"Sir Yuder. It seems you have woken up."

"Priest."

Not long after, Priest Lusan entered the room. Yuder had never been so grateful for his presence. If Lusan had arrived even a little later, Kanna would have seemed ready to confine him to the room forever.

"Let's see... Are you in pain?"

"No."

"How are your senses?"

As Lusan asked, he gently touched various parts of Yuder's face and arms. After a moment's thought, Yuder shook his head.

"I can feel your touch, but there's no pain."

"..."

Yuder thought Lusan would be relieved to hear he was not in pain, but for some reason, he was silent. Sensing his dark mood, Yuder cautiously asked.

"Is there something wrong with my condition?"

"It's quite peculiar. After all the divine power I poured into you, there's no heat."

Lusan muttered heavily.

"You would know that the monster was venomous. You drenched your entire body with its blood, so you can imagine what kind of state you'd be in, right?"

"It must not have been a pretty sight."

He hadn't given it much thought when he was covered in blood, but thinking about it now, he started to worry more about Kishiar, who had immediately picked him up after seeing him in that state.

"Yes. But that's not the problem. When I use divine power, it seems to heat up momentarily, but then it quickly returns to normal and the stained area expands. So now I've applied some herbs and wrapped you in bandages."

Lusan sighed worriedly.

"The reason you're hardly feeling anything now is probably due to the venom covering your skin and the pain reliever herbs. I don't know which one is having a stronger effect... but if it's due to the pain reliever, your senses will gradually return as time goes by, and you'll start to feel pain. I'm sorry I couldn't do more due to my lack of skill..."

"That's not true."

Yuder responded quickly. Being weak to monsters was an inherent flaw and a natural limit he had. Wounds inflicted by monsters in his previous life had often taken longer to heal than other injuries, and it was likely the same this time. But the young priest wasn't about to hold back his self-deprecating sigh. After mumbling gloomily for some time, Lusan, with weak movements, touched near Yuder's eyes and opened his mouth.

"Ah, as for your power, I'm not sure either, but the Commander instructed me to check that too once you wake up, so I will. Yuder, can you exert your strength now?"

'Strength, eh?' Yuder slowly flipped his palm and placed it in front of his chest, making a slight effort. He intended to summon an amount of water the size of a pea onto his palm, but as time passed, he didn't feel anything.

"Did it work?"

"Did you intentionally create just one drop?"

Kanna, who was beside him, questioned.

"I tried to create an amount the size of a pea in my hand."

"If it wasn't intentional, it seems you haven't recovered in that aspect yet."

Lusan pronounced his judgment in a grave voice. Yuder was struck by a considerable shock. It would have been better if his strength had been excessively appeared like before. The opposite had never even crossed his mind.

"..."

"Do you finally get that you can't act recklessly now? ...But don't worry too much, Yuder. You'll be able to recover. The Commander, and we, will find a way."

"I am..."

Yuder opened his mouth with a hard-to-express feeling, then closed it again. As Kanna was patting the back of his hand, the sound of fighting from outside was heard again. Just as Yuder turned his head, paying attention to the noise, Lusan suddenly raised his voice.

"Yuder. It's fortunate you woke up early, but you must know that sleep is the best rest. Now that we've checked your condition, take this and get some more rest."

"I'm okay... But what about outside..."

"Yuder, drink this."

Kanna joined in and poured something into his mouth. Yuder didn't even have a chance to say anything before his consciousness started to blur again.