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"Commander."

Not long after, the members saluted in unison at the sight of Kishiar who had just entered the reception room. Nathan Zuckerman followed him, his effort to conform to the role of the idle Knight of the Peletta apparent in his deliberately disheveled outfit. For the first time, Yuder felt deep sympathy for Nathan and rose from his seat. Enon opened his mouth, rolling his third lemon.

"Are you going to stick with the Commander all day again?"

"I guess so."

"If you have time, come to me."

"Why?"

"You, have you already forgotten why I was called here?"

Enon asked fiercely. The reason why he, who didn't want to leave the capital, was sitting there was purely because of Yuder's injury.

"I have to return to the capital as soon as possible. In the meantime, I've been looking around and thinking about something, so come anyway."

"Okay. Sorry."

"Don't keep saying you're sorry, think about taking care of yourself and getting better."

It was hard to tell if it was a reprimand or worry, but given Enon's personality, it was likely the latter. Yuder faintly smiled, then nodded his head slightly.

"According to Baron Willhem today, Tainu has many sights and attractions. You would want to see all the beauty that you might never see again, right?"

"Yes!"

Meanwhile, Kishiar, who had started talking to the members, was in the middle of his speech, in the perfect demeanor of a prodigal Duke.

"Good. I will give a week's rest to both the second dispatch team that has come this far and the first dispatch team that has suffered a lot in the Great Sarain Forest. Don't worry about the cost, just don't cross the border of Tainu and rest as much as you like."

At Kishiar's words, everyone cheered. In fact, they all knew that their real task was not to go out and play, but to search for traces of the illegal trade of the Tain family, but there's no one who wouldn't be happy at being told they could freely spend money and have fun. Baron Willhem's servants glared at the departing Cavalry members, who were leaving in groups with insect-bitten faces, but no one paid any attention to their gaze.

Yuder approached Kishiar, watching the happy members disappearing. Nathan Zuckerman, forcing himself to look down at his loose black cravat, greeted him first.

"You're here."

"Yes."

He looked at Yuder's face with an expression as if he had a lot to say, but didn't know what to say, and then sighed. In fact, ever since they reunited outside the Great Sarain Forest after Yuder regained his sight, he had been maintaining such an attitude. It was understandable considering the complex feelings he must have had knowing what his lord had been doing because of Yuder. As Yuder pretended not to notice and turned his head, Kishiar invited him out with a cheerful face as if he had been waiting.

"Yuder. I think we should go out today too, what do you think?"

"Where to?"

"Anywhere would be enjoyable as long as I'm with my assistant."

"...Understood."

Yuder accepted without asking further.

"Nathan, you're coming too. Follow us within ten steps so that my assistant won't be uncomfortable."

"Yes..."

Nathan answered with a clouded face, looking as cold as ice.

"Do you have someone you want to go with, assistant?"

"I am..."

When he lightly glanced around, all those who had not yet left and were still remaining avoided Yuder's gaze. Enon, who had his umpteenth lemon in front of him, also furrowed his brow and lowered his head as soon as his eyes met Yuder's. His dislike couldn't have been more apparent.

"There is none."

"Well, this will be a rare, modest outing."

Despite Kishiar's announcement that he would be heading out with only two accompanying personnel, there was no significant objection from the Willhem Household. The Baron, preoccupied with matters, regretfully sent a message via a servant stating his inability to join them. The indifference in his demeanor, which seemed unlikely given he was dealing with a Duke, clearly conveyed his assessment of Kishiar.

"Commander. Is it true that Baron Willhem desired to meet you because of the alcohol spilled yesterday?"

"Who said that?"

When Yuder shared the story he heard from Lusan, Kishiar burst into laughter.

"That wasn't why he wanted to see me. Outwardly, he was grandiose, claiming he could offer more assistance, but he must have felt regret internally."

"Then..."

"He called me to inquire about the Divine Sword. I acted ignorant and slipped away, which should keep him churning inside for a while."

The sword Kishiar possessed was, of course, the real Divine Sword. However, he deliberately played dumb, feigning a misunderstanding of Baron Willhem's words. The Baron, guessing that Kishiar was stalling because the sword wasn't truly divine, was furious. Yet, he could not openly rebuke him.

The Divine Sword in question was currently wrapped thickly in cloth around its sheath and hilt and hung from Kishiar's waist. It had been concealed this way since leaving Great Sarain Forest, with the passage of time naturally staining the cloth, making it look ordinary, even a mere practice sword, to the untrained eye.

"What can I do? Even if I tell him, he doesn't believe it's the real Divine Sword. Regardless of what I say, it would seem like a lie to him."

They spent the day touring various parts of Tainu, riding in a carriage provided by Baron Willhem. Kishiar purchased an enormous amount of items from all sorts of stores under the guise of gifting them to people around him. Among them, of course, were items intended for Yuder, who was playing the role of the Duke's lover.

Expensive new sword sheaths and dazzling gloves that couldn't be used in everyday life, cloaks made lavishly with gems and embroidery, and boxes containing precious leather shoes, quickly piled up next to Yuder's seat like a mountain. Ordinarily, he wouldn't have accepted such gifts, but rejecting them now could potentially undermine their mission.

After buying several items to gift to Nathan Zuckerman and forcing them upon him, Kishiar, with a cheerful face, visited a new store. It was a jeweler's shop, distinguished by a sign featuring a red deer's head.

"Hmm. A snuffbox made of Erihill jade, indeed. Truly reflective of the western land trade hub. It's rare, even in the capital, to see such a variety of precious foreign items in circulation. What do you think, assistant? Does it appeal to you?"

"...I don't smoke, so I won't be able to use it."

When Yuder politely declined, Kishiar, widening his eyes, picked it up. The snuffbox, carved out of blue jade, was just the right size to fit in a man's palm. Kishiar playfully retorted while easily opening the gem-cut lock and revealing the empty interior.

"One doesn't necessarily only put tobacco in a snuffbox. People often carry more things in here than you might think."

"That's correct. One can indeed fit quite a number of things in there."

The jeweler, thrilled by his rare big-spending client, immediately nodded and added proudly to the explanation upon hearing Kishiar's statement.

"You can also carry various incense other than tobacco, and some people carry their daily medicine. It has an additional lock inside, ideal for items you don't want to be discovered."

"Is that so? I didn't know that."

"When you twist it like this, a small space inside is revealed."

The merchant, proudly explaining that only the craftsmen of Aerial could create such a thing, twisted a certain part of the cloth lining inside the snuffbox. As he did, the bottom opened, revealing another small and flat empty space.

"An interesting item indeed. I like it. I'll buy this one as well."

"Thank you. You won't regret it."

"This kind of item must have been difficult to import. How did you manage?"

"Difficult doesn't mean impossible. All goods entering Tainu go through the verification of the Red Deer Consortium, funded by the Tain House. We are one of the places that have a long-standing contract with the Red Deer Consortium."

At the mention of the Tain House from the confident merchant, Kishiar's eyes momentarily twinkled secretively.

"Oh... I see. So, the item has passed the verification of the Tain House. I don't have to worry about counterfeits."

"Of course."

"Can I see more of these kind of items?"

With a vague smile, the merchant responded that it would be difficult to select such items right now.

"However, if you come back in a few days, I will have more items that you might find interesting. If you let me know where you are staying, I'll contact you."

"It's no fun if I can't see them right away. Well, I'll stop by again if I remember."

"I'm truly sorry to disappoint you."

"That's alright."

Kishiar turned around, as if he was a debauched noble whose interest had dwindled.

"I might as well visit the Red Deer Consortium directly. How do I get there?"

"It would be difficult for you to visit there without an introduction. It's not a place where they sell goods directly..."

"What a shame. There's no item I want to see right now, and you can't even tell me where the source is... Do I look like someone who needs an introduction?"

As the smile faded from the man's face who had been laughing until a moment ago, an intense chill was felt, so powerful that it was hard to believe he was the same person. The merchant, under the peculiar pressure that silently bore down on him, held his breath and blinked rapidly.

"No, that's... uh... that... I..."

"I?"

"I, I was about to... uh... I was about to offer... to write you a letter of introduction."

Only then did Kishiar smile again. The merchant, startled by the sensation that disappeared as quickly as a mirage, hurriedly disappeared into the back of the shop.

"...Are you planning on going there right away?"

"Of course."

Kishiar lightly answered Yuder's question.

"That's because I want to give a very special gift to my lover right now."

"..."

Unknowingly, Yuder once again shifted his gaze slightly. The gaze of Nathan Zuckerman was intensely hot.

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In this place, engaging in banter would not yield any meaningful exchange. Thus, he decided to remain silent.

Soon after, Kishiar learned the address of the district where the Red Deer Consortium was located from a merchant who appeared with an introduction letter. Yuder sighed softly as he peered inside the carriage, noting even more boxes than before. If Kishiar had bought any more items here, they would have needed to call for an additional carriage.

"Why? Aren't you pleased with the gifts?"

"It's fortunate that we've made progress in our investigation into the trade of the Tain Ducal House, but I feel you've spent too much for it."

"This isn't that much of an expense."

Kishiar replied nonchalantly, resting his arm atop one of the stacked boxes.

"The cost is worth several times this. Don't worry."

Although his smile was alluringly confident, Nathan's gaze on Yuder's cheek became even more intense than before. Yuder surmised that Nathan Zuckerman must have sensed something from them, something that couldn't be explained simply by their roles in this charade.

Thinking about it, Kishiar being the first to act in front of others today was what they had hoped for. However, the fact that the first person to act was Kishiar's loyal adjutant, a knight from the Southern country, was slightly problematic.

It seemed that on this matter alone, things wouldn't go as Yuder had intended.

"This is the Red Deer Consortium."

Kishiar parked the carriage where he could oversee the entire building. For a guild that claimed to inspect all traded goods entering Tainu, its size was rather modest. However, the number of people bustling about was surprisingly large. Workers emerged from the building to unload the arriving carriages, then transfer the goods to other vehicles. It was a continuous scene of busy activity.

"There sure are a lot of people, considering they said it's difficult to enter without an introduction."

"The name may be a guild, but their actual task is to manage traded goods on behalf of the Tain Ducal House."

"Do you think they're also connected to Baron Willhem?"

"Probably."

Yuder attentively watched the carriages as they continually loaded and unloaded goods. Given the volume of merchandise being moved, there must have been a separate storage warehouse somewhere.

"Shall we go in?"

Without hesitation, Kishiar took the lead, introduction letter in hand. When the tall, handsome man flanked by two other men approached with the letter, the bustling workers of the guild halted, unsure of how to react. They tried explaining that they didn't sell goods here, but Kishiar, true to his carefree duke demeanor, dismissed their words with a simple tilt of his head.

"I want to see the special items being brought in right now. I wish to find a nice gift for my lover today."

Soon after, a man holding a bundle of papers and a quill pen rushed out from inside the building, approaching Kishiar.

"Who... Who are you, sir?"

"Don't you recognize me?"

Although it was obvious they wouldn't know him, Kishiar asked with a hint of mischief. Imperial family members were often born with blonde hair and red eyes, but these features were not exclusive to them. Many noble families with a long lineage had members with golden hair or red-colored eyes appearances, a result of mixed imperial bloodlines. The Tain Ducal House, rulers of Tainu, was especially famous for many members born with such features.

Assuming by his appearance that he was simply a noble from a prestigious family, the ordinary man was taken aback when Kishiar revealed his identity as the Duke of Peletta.

"Duke Peletta, also known as the Commander of the Cavalry, Kishiar La Orr."

"Yes?"

"I am currently staying at Baron Willhem's mansion."

"Yes?"

"Haven't you heard of the achievements of the Cavalry from the Great Sarain Forest? This is truly disappointing."

"No, I haven't."

The man, with a shocked expression, lowered his head, clearly unsure whether to kneel or not. After a moment of confusion, he regained his composure. Carefully, he led Kishiar, Yuder, and Nathan inside. The main building consisted of two floors. Without pausing, Yuder wandered the open space on the first floor, observing the workers carrying luggage, then headed to the second floor. The second floor had proper rooms, but most were filled with stacks of documents.

The man led them to the cleanest reception room and asked them to wait momentarily while he fetched the person in charge. As soon as he left, Kishiar immediately called over Nathan Zuckerman.

"Nathan."

"Yes?"

"From now on, you're going to pretend you went to find the restroom and got lost."

"..."

"After you've assessed the interior structure and personnel, reconvene with us."

The instincts of an exceptional swordmaster sometimes surpassed even that of a mage or an Awakener. With Nathan Zuckerman's skills, he would quickly discern such details.

"Understood."

Nathan Zuckerman promptly stood up without any sign of discomfort at the command. Not long after he left the room, a middle-aged man with glasses hurriedly entered. He bore a striking resemblance to Baron Willhem.

"It's an honor to meet Duke Peletta, the hero who saved the entire west and the guardian of noble blood. I am Graham Willhem, the adviser of the Red Deer Consortium."

"Willhem?"

"The Baron Willhem you've already met is my elder brother."

"Oh, I see."

Graham seemed better at hiding his true feelings than his brother. He appeared unfazed even by the sudden visit of Duke Peletta, who had brought only two attendants to the main building.

"My apologies, Your Grace, but I heard you came here to arrange a gift for someone dear to you. Is that correct?"

"Precisely."

"However, our firm only evaluates and authenticates items brought in to Tainu from outside. We do not have the right to sell. I'm truly sorry."

"Who decided that? Isn't it inconvenient to have to distribute imported items to other stores for sale?"

"That was the directive of Duke Tain, the owner of Tainu. Tainu has been one of the central trading hubs of the western land route for a long time. Without such procedures, there would be problems with indiscriminate imports, verifications, and sales. Duke Tain, after repeatedly experiencing such issues, established this system about 15 years ago to prevent further inconvenience."

Yuder discovered another virtue in the younger Willhem compared to his brother: he was very eloquent.

"I see. If your family has been doing this for 15 years, when did you start working here?"

"Me? I... took over this position after my uncle, so I've been here for about 7 years."

"That's impressive. It must not have been an easy task."

"Not at all."

As the unexpected praise began, a brief expression of suspicion flickered across Graham Willhem's face, as if he were trying to decipher Kishiar's intentions.

"Did you hear about me from your brother?"

"Yes. I heard that you would soon be visiting Tainu. I thought I wouldn't see you since I don't stay in the mansion, but... It's truly an honor to meet you here..."

"Oh? So, you really consider it an honor?"

"Yes?... Yes, of course."

"Then shouldn't you help me even more?"

Kishiar chuckled and poked Graham Willhem's side.

"But I just told you I don't have the authority to sell..."

"How frustrating."

Kishiar shook his head.

"I get that I can't buy right now. But time isn't infinite. Do you think I'll have another chance to visit here with my lovely assistant? At the very least, can't you show me what you have? Other merchants visiting here can at least look at the goods, can't they?"

"..."

"I've wasted enough time getting here, so I don't intend to leave just like that. I'd rather stay here than let my assistant leave empty-handed."

With an absurdly childish threat, Kishiar pulled Yuder close, embracing his shoulder. Yuder leaned in, trying to be as cooperative as possible. Graham Willhem's eyes twitched uncontrollably, trembling minutely.

"I'm sorry, but... your precious one, the one you wanted to gift...?"

"Why don't you find out?"

Kishiar teasingly kissed the top of Yuder's forehead, laughing. Graham Willhem abruptly stood up. His gaze, fixed on the two of them, was filled not with restrained emotion but with disgust. Despite his eloquence, it seemed he wasn't so different from his brother in essence.

"What are you looking for? Let me know, and I'll guide you to the warehouse directly. The warehouse, unlike the store, is a dirty place where only the lowly work, but if you still want to see..."

"I'm looking for rare and interesting imports that require meticulous verification. I'd appreciate it if you could hurry. Otherwise, while waiting, I might get so bored that I'd want to do something here with my assistant."

"Some of those valuables just arrived today and are in the basement. I'll guide you. Please follow."

Graham Willhem hastily exited the room. Kishiar, with a soft laugh, led Yuder. As they left, it was fortunate that Nathan Zuckerman's absence hadn't been noticed.

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The underground passage, where they had brought in the valuables, was located in the exact opposite direction from where they had entered. As Yuder descended along stairs that resembled an emergency exit, he realized that he couldn't see the workers from the first floor from this angle.

'They've strategically placed it to avoid any human gaze. I bet they're also controlling access.'

As expected, a few men were loitering near the dark entrance of the basement, guarding the way. They had been idly stretched out, but at the sudden appearance of Graham and the strangers, they swiftly adjusted their postures. Yuder discreetly observed them. Most who worked in such places were mercenaries hired on a temporary basis. However, judging from the weapons they held and their saluting stance, they didn't seem like your average mercenaries.

"You've arrived."

"Is anyone inside right now?"

"No one."

Graham, glancing disdainfully at the men, turned his head. His gaze passed over Kishiar and landed on Yuder's face with evident distaste.

"You can enter right away...but do you plan to keep...him with you throughout?"

"What if I do?"

"The inside isn't dangerous, so it might be better if the others wait here. It will be more comfortable for you to look around."

It was a gentle way of saying he didn't want to let in not just the duke, but even his male lover. Kishiar, however, wasn't about to take that at face value. Crossing his arms, he expertly shielded Yuder from Graham's view and playfully asked, "Hmm. What do you think is best, Yuder? Should I go alone?"

"I'm fine either way."

"No, no. In a situation like this, you should be jealous and tell me not to leave you alone. Aren't you worried about me being alone with another man?"

The expressions of both Graham and the guards changed dramatically. Yuder hesitated for a moment before saying, "...Of course, I'm worried."

For a moment, Kishiar looked genuinely surprised, as if he hadn't expected Yuder to say that. Graham, unable to object to Yuder anymore, hastily gestured for the door to be opened.

"Open the door, now!"

He was trying to let the duke enter without the lover, but it nearly dragged him into a scandal. As he quickly stepped inside, an eerie chill followed him.

Without any hindrance, Yuder entered the interior alongside Kishiar. At first glance, the basement seemed dim and old. However, upon closer inspection, it was evident that it was thoroughly prepared to protect valuable items. The floor was designed to amplify even the softest sound, and the walls, when lightly grazed by Yuder's fingers, were incomparably solid to the floors above. There were surely hidden security spells, making this space undeniably the true heart of the building.

"All the items brought in yesterday are in one place. We'll go there directly."

"There seem to be many rooms. Aren't we going to check the others?"

When Kishiar, looking around at the closed doors lining the corridor, asked, Graham shook his head.

"The other rooms are just backup storage. Given the limited number of valuables to store here, most remain empty."

Graham's voice was calm, but after speaking, the subtle throat-clearing and his swallowing, coupled with his dry lips compressing, emitted a hint of suspicion.

'There's a high chance it was a lie.'

"This is the place."

Graham stood in front of a door, pulling out a necklace he had tucked inside his clothes. When he brought one hand with the deer-antler pendant from the necklace to the door, a blue magic circle began to shine and spread from that point. Moments later, the door opened silently and effortlessly.

Illuminated by moonstones, the interior was filled with transparent shelves. Graham briefly introduced the items on the shelves after warning not to touch anything carelessly, as they were all protected by magic.

"Among the recent arrivals, many are from Aeryl and Nelarn. As you might already know, Aeryl has a deep history in gem crafting, and Nelarn once had many magic stone mines. Even if the magical tools made during those times are not usable now, they are valuable as collectibles due to their beautiful appearance."

Various luxury items made from all sorts of gems and dozens of magic tools claimed to be from a long time ago were on display, each showcasing their unique beauty. They indeed were worth the immense effort to protect.

"Beautiful indeed. But just being beautiful isn't intriguing. At the last store I visited, they showed me a jade snuffbox with a hidden compartment. Do you have something like that?"

"Recent crafts from Aeryl often incorporate such hidden compartments. Many items here have those features. For instance, this brooch can hold two portraits. Normally, you'll see just the first picture, but if you turn the tiny protrusion, it changes to the second."

Those who needed such items probably had secret lovers or affairs they couldn't reveal to others. Graham's attempt to subtly criticize came across as him expressing his discomfort towards Kishiar, who blatantly brought his male lover.

"That's interesting. If it were me, I'd put two pictures of the same person."

With an unfazed smile, Kishiar examined the brooch. Graham realized that indirect criticisms simply didn't work on the man before him.

"So, when do you plan to send these items to other stores?"

"Once all appraisal processes are completed, we will call the merchants we have contracts with. These items took a while to come in due to the trade route of Great Sarain Forest not functioning properly for some time. Distribution might be delayed, but we intend to send everything out within a week."

"I see. Good to know. I've enjoyed the viewing. I've decided on a gift, so I should probably return in about a week."

Kishiar seemed truly contented with just looking around and then stepped back. Seeing Kishiar's compliant demeanor, Graham slightly relaxed the tension between his brows.

As they exited the basement, the guards at the door looked at them with curious eyes. Yuder felt a bit pleased, realizing that this time, the gaze wasn't just focused on Kishiar but also on him.

"Your Majesty, are you planning to return to your mansion now?"

"That's the plan."

"When the items are released, I'll inform you through my brother."

His kindness was filled with a plea not to come back here again if possible.

They ascended to the second floor and retraced their steps. Nathan Zuckerman, who had returned in their absence, was seated quietly in the parlor. He rose when he saw Kishiar.

"...A Southerner?"

"Ah, he's my officer. He had some urgent matters to attend to earlier and I completely forgot to mention it."

Graham, who belatedly noticed Nathan Zuckerman's presence, looked taken aback. Kishiar casually explained with a smile.

"Nathan, did you manage to get your task done?"

"Yes, I got a bit lost along the way, which made my return delayed. Did you find the item you were looking for?"

"Well, nothing particularly caught my fancy, but there were quite a few decent things. It was good to come."

Graham couldn't guess the profound implications hidden within this casual conversation. He tried to conceal his astonishment as he saw the three off. Yuder suspected what kind of message he would convey to his brother, Baron Willhem.

"There was a spell in the basement that distorts perception. It made the vast space appear much smaller than it actually is. I'm rather curious about what else might be behind those closed doors."

As soon as Kishiar got into the carriage, he voiced suspicions similar to what Yuder had felt underground. Yuder cautiously added his assumption, mentioning that those guarding the basement didn't seem like ordinary mercenaries.

"Their posture and the fact that all of them used identical weapons lead me to believe they might be regular guards trained in Tainu."

"With Baron Willhem in charge, that's highly probable."

Kishiar nodded in agreement, a sardonic smile on his lips.

"Externally, they claim it's all part of a well-intentioned policy, acting as if they are a fair and just group. But every sign shows their utter pettiness. It seems the Tain Duke has monopolized the verification process of trade goods in Tainu for a long time and made a good profit."

Given that everyone knew the Duke of Tain was now even delving into more dangerous trades, the words of Graham Willhem, claiming that the Duke only had Tainu's best interests in mind when making policies, seemed utterly laughable.

"Nathan, what did you see?"

"I examined the structure of the first and second floors. There weren't any hidden spaces, but in the innermost room, which I assume is the master's, there was a safe."

"Did you check what's inside?"

"There was a spell on it that seemed hard to break in such a short time. I tried, but failed when someone working approached the room."

"That's a pity."

Kishiar clicked his tongue briefly.

"Also... I observed the workers on the first floor, and there was something peculiar."

"Peculiar in what way?"

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"Most of them were ordinary people, but among them was someone imbued with a peculiar energy."

Kishiar's eyes narrowed.

"Explain in detail."

"When the Cavalry members use their powers strongly, I occasionally feel a unique sensation. Today, while observing those working on the first floor, I felt a similar sensation and tried to chase after the person causing it... but I lost them."

"You lost them?"

"I was certain I was following them, but they disappeared. Looking around, I couldn't determine who I had been chasing."

It was truly astonishing that anyone, let alone Nathan Zuckerman, could lose someone. Kishiar seemed to share the sentiment, reining in his smile and falling deep into thought.

"Do you remember their face?"

"I only saw their back, so I can't be certain."

"What about other distinctive features?"

At that, Nathan Zuckerman's eyelids fluttered. Trying to recall, he remained silent for a moment, then shook his head with a look of both discomfort and bewilderment.

"I thought I knew, but as I try to describe it, I'm not sure. They might have been taller than me, or perhaps shorter... I don't even understand what I'm saying."

"I have an inkling of who the culprit might be."

Kishiar muttered, turning his head. Yuder caught his gaze and gave a slight nod.

"It seems Nahan has already made his move here."

A heavy tension enveloped the interior of the carriage. As Yuder recalled the last sight of Nahan, Kishiar gently tapped the gift box he had been resting his arm on.

"Thinking about it, this might be a blessing in disguise. Proof that we are on the right track."

"..."

"Both of you, inform all the members about this. I need to meet with Baron Willhem."

While Kishiar went to find Baron Willhem, Yuder gathered the returned Cavalry members. As for the Peletta Knights, Nathan Zuckerman would handle them, so Yuder only needed to inform the cavalry. Members who already knew about Nahan's activities in Great Sarain Forest and the Star of Nagran couldn't hide their tension.

"Could they have infiltrated here as well? How can we identify someone who can use illusions?"

"It's unfortunate that we have so few among us with mental abilities."

Yuder knew why there were so few initial members with mental abilities. Those with abilities hard to visually prove often couldn't even properly submit their applications and were washed out. Kanna had almost met the same fate.

This issue might be alleviated when new members joined, but that time was not now.

"I don't care. If the one who did that to Priest Lusan is already here, it's a good thing. I've been curious since the days of the Apeto Duchy. This time, I'll definitely see his face and make him pay."

Ever, with her fist clenched coldly, replied. Lusan, who had been wearing a somber expression in the distance, couldn't hide his touched expression.

"Ever..."

"Ah, and Yuder. We also went out today and heard a rather troubling rumor."

As Yuder turned his head in confusion, Ever waited for a moment when the Willhem household's servants were away and lowered her voice.

"Recently, in a village near Tainu, ten lunatics appeared all at once. There were foreigners and empire citizens alike, all of whom couldn't remember who they were or why they were there."

The mixed group of men and women wandered aimlessly until they were arrested by the security force that had received a report. Yet, surprisingly, such incidents didn't end there.

"I heard that just yesterday, in a nearby village, several similar groups appeared, causing unease among the locals," one said.

"It sounds like a rumor we need to verify," another remarked.

"Right? It's possible that these could be the people driven out from the Awakener's village that Kanna visited."

Ever, while suggesting it as a possibility, looked quite certain.

"If we investigate these people, we might find clues about where they went."

“Did you find out where the captured ones went?”

“According to the villagers, if the village lord finds it too challenging to decide, they are transferred to Tainu for a verdict. So, they might already be here somewhere.”

It was a plausible assumption. Yuder nodded and said that he would report it to Kishiar. Although initiating the process might lead to friction with the knights or soldiers inside Tainu, Ever wasn't one to get intimidated by such prospects, so there seemed to be no need to worry.

“Let me know if you find out more.”

“I will. Yuder, you must be exhausted from following the commander. If you ever need help, just let me know. Sometimes, it's better to accept assistance from others rather than overstretching oneself, understand?”

“...”

Yuder felt a mix of emotions at the gentle consolation but simply responded with a nod of acknowledgment.

“Is Enon here?”

Taking advantage of the time before Kishiar returned, Yuder headed to the room where Enon was staying. As soon as Yuder knocked, Enon peered out, scanned Yuder from top to bottom, and then opened the door a bit wider to let him in.

“You returned quicker than I expected.”

“There were urgent matters I had to relay to others.”

“What urgent matters?”

The room Enon occupied was a single room, much smaller than the one Kishiar and Yuder were staying in. Yet, compared to the dilapidated pharmacy of the slum where he had previously lived, it was almost palatial.

Briefly explaining the Red Deer Consortium and the Awakener's village in the Great Sarain Forest where Kishiar and Yuder went, and potentially where Nahan was, Enon casually asked,

"I heard about that Awakener village or whatever from others yapping about it. But is this Nahan guy really that formidable?"

"Among the Awakeners with the mental ability I've encountered, it's hard to find anyone stronger than him."

"So, you can't defeat him?"

That was a somewhat sensitive question. After a moment of silence, Yuder shook his head.

"I can defeat him."

"Then it's settled. From what I've heard, they all seem like Modar types. Better weed them out before they grow too strong."

Yuder hesitated for a moment at the meaningful statement.

"Modar?"

"You've never heard of him? The mage Modar."

Of course, Yuder had. But only in old tales and legends. Most stories about him painted Modar as a wicked mage who wreaked havoc upon the world but ultimately faced divine retribution and failed.

"I knew of him... but I never thought he was real."

"Of course, he was. He ran amok everywhere, trying to create a kingdom only for mages using magic, and eventually got caught and was executed."

"By whom?"

"By Luma."

He hadn't known that. Suddenly, Yuder felt both a strong familiarity with the figure from the legend and a sense of distance from Enon. Memories of his past life, when he had never fully believed the information Enon shared, suddenly flashed through his mind.

"...Enon, how old are you?"

"Why do you need to know?"

As Yuder impulsively asked the question, Enon, who was rummaging through a bag placed on the bed, responded curtly. After a moment, he continued, "Didn't my past self tell you about that?"

"You did mention you've lived a long time."

"Hmm... well... why is it that you, who was satisfied with that answer back then, suddenly want to know now?"

Yuder remained silent. How could he tell Enon that in his previous life, Enon had vanished after leaving a letter that hinted he might never return? The fact that he had always been curious but couldn't ask made it even harder. In truth, apart from the brief facts Enon had shared, Yuder knew very little about him. He had simply thought of Enon as the first ally to rely upon.

"If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine."

"Do you realize how annoying it is when you say things like that?"

Finally finding what he had been searching for in his bag, Enon approached Yuder, holding something. Yuder saw his own expressionless reflection in Enon's bright yellow eyes.

"Every time you look at me with that distant gaze, as if you know something about me, it really irks me. If you have something to say, say it. Otherwise, stop. Before telling you my age, did I, I don't know, die or something?"

"..."

For a moment, Yuder couldn't deny it. To be precise, Enon hadn't died but had left and never returned. However, Yuder couldn't honestly distinguish between the two.

"Is it true?"

Seeing the assurance in Yuder's silence, the look in Enon's eyes changed.

"Did I really die?"

"...You said you didn't believe it."

"I don't. But...!"

Enon, about to shout something, abruptly closed his mouth. He ruffled his hair roughly and took a deep breath.

"...Since you appeared, the world has been changing, becoming different from before. You definitely know something. I'm sure of that."

Turning

Chapter 335

Unbeknownst to himself, Yuder wore a bitter smile, only to erase it shortly after.

No one was better at distinguishing between lies and truths than Enon. Though he claimed not to believe, the fact that he eventually said the exact opposite indicated which way his thoughts had been leaning.

Yuder had been the one to seek Enon's help in the hope that things would turn out this way from the beginning. However, once it actually came to pass, he strangely didn't feel as good about it as he had expected. He somewhat regretted not being able to maintain his usual composure when talking about his past life in front of Enon.

"Yes, you're right. As I've mentioned before, I know a bit more than others."

What Yuder knew was only the future he had witnessed in his own life. When he first turned back time, he felt joy for a moment, having grasped all possibilities. However, the more he twisted the past to change the outcome, the more he became aware of how many things in the world he didn't know.

But there was still much he could do with that limited information.

"But Enon, watching me closely over time, your thoughts couldn't have been solely that, right?"

"..."

"You are not the kind of person who will just leave the capital just because someone drags you along. Even now..."

"Stop right there."

"Alright. If you have thoughts of helping me a bit more, feel free to ask your questions. I'll tell you as much as I can within what I know. You make the decision."

Yuder ceased his speech, staring at Enon's face, his mouth firmly closed.

"But if that happens... I'd like you to tell me more about yourself."

"What's the use of knowing me in detail? Can you believe whatever I tell you?"

"I'll believe. Because you believed in me."

At his flat response, Enon momentarily stopped speaking. He looked away as if at a loss for words, then mumbled in a defeated tone.

"I said... I still don't believe."

"Yes, you did."

"I really don't know what you're thinking. I've never met a person like you since Luma."

Whether being compared to the legendary Archmage was good or bad, he didn't know. Enon raised his head towards the ceiling, then let out a deep sigh and returned to his original position.

"I need some time to think. I'm not sure at the moment."

"Understood. You can tell me when you've sorted things out."

"...But tell me, did I really die?"

Yuder quietly shook his head. Looking into Enon's seriously wide eyes, he somehow let out a bitter smile.

"No, not exactly. You disappeared."

"Disappeared?"

"You said you had something to investigate and left a letter, then disappeared. You told me to mention the information you had given me if we met again and you didn't remember me."

He didn't realize it would be after he had died and returned.

"I never got to meet you again after that."

Hearing Yuder's words, Enon stroked his chin, a look of recognition in his eyes.

"...Then I guess I did die. Maybe different from the death you're thinking of."

Puzzled about what he meant, Yuder blinked, only to see Enon wince and give a grin.

"I'm not human."

"What?"

"See. You don't believe me, do you? Your words sound exactly like that to me."

"No..."

It was too sudden to fully comprehend, but Yuder decided to carefully ask again.

"I'll believe you. If you're not human... what are you then."

"I wonder."

In imitation, Enon replied briefly, then tilted his head to ask another question.

"What do you think it is?"

"..."

The Enon before him looked nothing more than a handsome young man with a youthful body, no matter how he looked. He had heard tales of a time when fairies, monsters, and other non-human entities had lived in this world alongside humans, but these stories only ever surfaced in ancient texts.

"You mentioned... The Guardian of Luma."

"Yeah, The Guardian of Luma. Honestly, even I find it difficult to precisely define myself. It's hard to simply explain how I was created for a purpose and received life through a contract. If I have to introduce myself, I'd say I'm The Guardian of Luma, but....."

Enon, who had been momentarily thoughtful, resumed speaking.

"To express it more accurately, I am an entity that has been linked by combining will and body through magic."

A long silence passed. Enon stared at Yuder and asked him pointedly,

"So, what do you think? You've heard what you wanted to hear, do you have anything else to say? What are your thoughts? Do you think it's nonsense not to believe? Or, are you scared? Do you think I'm a monster?"

"I was thinking about the Armor Knight of Luma in the palace."

Enon's expression changed as if he'd been caught off guard.

"What? That thing is still around?"

"I saw it last time."

Thinking about the Armor Knight, reputedly created by Luma, which he had seen moving perfectly fine, it didn't seem too strange to believe Enon's words. There was a being who had come back by turning back time after death, so what was so significant about a human created by magic? Yuder inspected Enon from head to toe, hesitated a bit, and asked,

"So, was that also created by Luma? Is it similar to you?"

"No."

Enon answered sharply, then shortly after, his mouth curled up into a slight grin. He looked at Yuder as if he didn't know what to say, then murmured in a low voice,

"You're crazy... Yuder... You really believe me."

"There's a way to go back in time, so I guess an Archmage can create you."

Yuder found it odd that he was saying something that his past, incredibly practical self, Yuder Aile, would never have believed. Enon, hearing Yuder's words, made a face as if he was about to laugh but then quickly turned his head away.

"Damn. You believe too easily. This is even weirder."

"..."

"Did I really go wrong?"

Enon, who had been mumbling to himself, added that he still didn't fully trust Yuder's words. His voice was much weaker compared to before. He kept silent for a while before saying that he wanted to ask one question before sorting out his thoughts.

"How did you come back?"

Yuder had expected this question would be the first one. However, anticipating a question did not mean he could answer it well.

The day when petals were fluttering in the sky and the sky was unusually clear came to Yuder's mind. It was the day when everything ended for him and when everything began again.

"Honestly, I don't know."

"...You don't know?"

"I just came back here all of a sudden. I thought of it as an opportunity and thought I should do better this time."

Enon's gaze on him became even stranger.

Yuder had expected to be called a madman once again, but for some reason, Enon remained silent. After a moment, the words he uttered brought up an unexpected conversation from the past.

"Do you remember... a statement I made before?"

"What statement?"

"I said that even Luma couldn't turn back time."

Yuder seemed to recall something like that being said around the time Enon had refused to believe his claim about coming from the future. As Yuder nodded, Enon's expression darkened. In his eyes, an unknowable thought spiraled far away.

"Luma... he was obsessed with a magical research for a long time. He kept it a secret from others, but I knew it was research about time-reversing magic. But he failed. That's why he left. He left everything behind..."

Yuder just quietly listened to Enon's disjointed mumblings.

"I actually couldn't understand why he wanted to research that kind of magic. I was curious why he didn't give up despite the constant failures..."

Enon's gaze slowly returned to Yuder. He was looking at Yuder with an utterly unfamiliar expression.

"He said back then. If a god can do it, a human can too."

"..."

"I'm not saying I fully believe you yet. But I... Every time I see you, I keep thinking about that. Maybe the reason Luma was interested in that was because there was a precedent of someone spouting the same words, like you."

"Are you saying there was someone else who turned back time?"

"I don't know."

Enon answered briefly and rubbed his head.

"But somehow, I have that feeling."

Enon's questions ended there. Even though they had had a conversation that was hard for both of them to believe, Yuder strangely felt that they shared something deeper than before.

"Take this."

Enon took out an item from his bag and handed it to Yuder. It was a small potion with a transparent color.

"Your recovery seems slow probably because your body had somewhat adapted to the monster's blood before the magic spell succeeded, so I made a potion to stimulate your vitality."

"...What happens if I drink this?"

"It will likely influence your innate energy, so you might have trouble controlling your strength for a while. If it reacts well, you might have a fever, but there won't be any significant harm."

Enon answered along with a word that he was not completely certain.

Turning

Chapter 336

"But it's not really dangerous."

"..."

Yuder took a glance at the item, then immediately opened the lid and drank from it. The medicine wasn't enough for more than a sip, so he didn't feel any significant changes right away.

"Also, it may not have much effect, so that thing... the one that the Commander brought here. I'd like to examine it more."

"The monster?"

"Yes. That one."

Upon entering this place, Yuder remembered the cage that Kishiar had entrusted to Nathan Zuckerman. It was holding Pethuamet. Very few people knew that Pethuamet had arrived there alive, but Enon and Lusan were included because they were in charge of medical care. Lusan was shocked to hear that the small monster had responded to Yuder, but Enon didn't say a word, seemingly having gathered some hint from the situation.

"But it might be dangerous."

"Should I worry about a small creature like that being dangerous to me, or should I be more worried about what's happening to your body? Why do I always have to be the one worrying about this? Shouldn't it be you? Your eyes need to get better soon so I can return to the capital."

In response to Enon's sudden irritation, Yuder had no choice but to agree for now.

"Okay. I'll let the Commander know."

"Don't think you're fine just because you're feeling better. There's an excessive mix of energies within you. The pure poison that created the darkened skin could tip in any direction. Don't use your strength carelessly."

"I've always wondered... how do you know that? Can you see it?"

"Can I see it...? Wait. Don't change the subject."

Enon, who seemed about to answer, suddenly tensed his eyes, revealing his teeth. Yuder quietly stepped back and opened the door. He said he should go now, to which Enon responded with a mumble filled with expletives, but he didn't stop Yuder.

"Hey."

Yuder turned his head at the voice he heard just before he closed the door. Enon, tilting his head as if displeased, whispered softly.

"You said before that you didn't want the same thing to happen as before you returned here."

"..."

"Did that include my case too?"

Yuder remained silent. His silence was answer enough. The man with the ash-colored hair shook his brows slightly, let out a sigh, and blinked once.

"So that's why you came to me."

When Baron Willhem heard the news that Kishiar, who had gone out, had come across the traces of the knight killer he had met in the Great Sarain Forest, his reaction was fierce.

He immediately doubled the number of guards patrolling Tainu and even sent out knights who normally didn't patrol the streets to conduct inspections. The people of Tainu, unaware of the reason, trembled in confusion, but Baron Willhem placated them by simply saying it was to capture a dangerous criminal.

"His haste will help us. I'm planning to follow the areas where he has sent a concentrated number of knights."

Returning from successfully manipulating his target with a single sentence, Kishiar removed his coat with a satisfied smile. As he began to unbutton his shirt without hesitation, Yuder subtly averted his gaze. It was a sight he'd seen in the morning, but somehow, watching him undress at night felt a bit more provocative.

Yet, when he turned his head, what met his gaze was a new sofa that the servants had replaced in the meantime. When Yuder had returned before Kishiar and seen the mountain of gift boxes and the newly changed sofa, he was overcome with a strange feeling as he remembered what they had done on the ruined sofa. He mused that seeing the new sofa had troubled him more than when he had actually caused the mess, knowing that Kishiar would undoubtedly laugh if he admitted this.

"How are things with the members? Have you explained everything to them?"

"Yes."

Yuder reflexively answered, lifting his head once more. The sight of Kishiar's exposed torso caught his eye, making him pause momentarily.

"...Ever said she heard a strange rumor today, did you already receive a report about it?"

"No. What happened?"

Kishiar's neck and shoulders glistened under the chandelier light. The straight bones leading to the inside of his shoulder, the shadow filling them like a well, and the perfect line formed by his chest flowing down like water drew his gaze with their beauty.

"Yuder?"

"Yes."

Yuder came back to his senses at Kishiar's call.

"I apologize. According to Ever..."

Suddenly, he couldn't remember what Ever had said. He realized for the first time how hard it was to keep his cool, with his waist reflexively tensing up and an uncomfortable sensation creeping in simultaneously.

"I see. We'll have to investigate that as well. However..."

After listening to Yuder's full statement, Kishiar narrowed his eyes slightly and stepped closer.

"Did something happen while I was away?"

"..."

A worried voice accompanied his touch as it grazed his cheek. Through the chill of it, Yuder only then realized how heated his own skin was. Suddenly, the potion that Enon had given him came to his mind.

He had said that if the medicine worked, a fever might occur, apparently, his body temperature had risen without him realizing it. He felt slightly relieved, thinking that the sudden tension he had felt was because of that.

"Enon gave me a potion that he said would help... it seems to have caused a fever."

"A potion?"

"He said that the reason my eyes aren't getting better could be because they had already partially adapted to the monster's blood before the magic casting."

The hand stroking his cheek paused momentarily. After contemplating in silence, Kishiar muttered briefly, "That could be possible."

"It's a potion to move vitality, so it might cause a bit of a fever, but it won't be harmful to my health. More importantly..."

Yuder sighed softly and turned his head.

"Please let me go now."

His hand withdrew, but the tension didn't disappear. Because Kishiar's bare upper body was too close.

"Do you feel unwell?"

"No. I'm fine."

"Really?"

"I'm really fine, so for now... I wish you would start by getting dressed."

"...It seems like you're really okay."

Only then did Kishiar raise the corners of his mouth, seeming to believe Yuder's assertion that he was not unwell.

"Where did you put the clothes I had washed? I thought they were here, but I don't see them."

"They're over there. Please wait."

Hoping that his face hadn't revealed his discomfort, Yuder rose from his seat. The indoor shirt for Duke Peletta had been washed and folded neatly on the bed. As he returned with it, he was reminded of a similar situation from a day when Kishiar's condition had been poor and he had been lying in the Commander's bedroom.

At that time, too, he had avoided looking directly at Kishiar's body, but now the situation was somehow more intense than before. At least then, seeing Kishiar's body hadn't caused a sudden rush of heat that left him parched...

When Yuder returned with the shirt and opened it for Kishiar to easily slip his arms into, Kishiar smirked.

"There was a day like this before... do you remember?"

Yuder had just been thinking of that very moment, and it seemed Kishiar was doing the same.

"Yes."

"So this is what it feels like to have a similar yet different experience."

Yuder didn't respond. It felt as though he'd been caught in his thoughts. Once Kishiar had slipped his arms into the shirt, he began to button it up himself, smoothing out the fabric. His movements were expertly done.

"Did you already have your meal?"

"No."

Yuder hadn't eaten dinner because his conversation with Enon had gone on longer than expected. But he didn't mind; he wasn't particularly hungry.

"I didn't feel like eating with Baron Willhem, so I just had some tea. In that case, we should have something brought here."

"I'm fine."

"There's nothing more melancholy than eating alone. Let's eat together."

Even though Yuder knew that Kishiar ate most of his meals alone at the Cavalry, he found himself agreeing. Once Kishiar discovered that Yuder had skipped a meal due to his conversation with Enon, he uncharacteristically inquired further.

"It's the first time I've heard you say that you lost track of time in a conversation. Was it that interesting?"

It wasn't an interesting conversation. In fact, it was closer to the opposite. But Yuder couldn't tell him what they had discussed, so he changed the subject.

"Just a discussion related to my condition. Enon asked for a personal examination of the monster."

"The monster?"

Turning

Chapter 337

"There seemed to be parts of the treatment that he wanted to investigate further. I thought it might be dangerous, so he suggested that it would be okay to explore it with someone else accompanying him... For now, I've replied that I would inform the Commander."

"I see..."

Over the tilted head of Kishiar, a fleeting emotion, unidentifiable, passed by momentarily.

"I'm relieved he has come. If I knew this would happen, I should've included him in the first dispatch team."

"If you had, I believe Enon would have refused."

"I heard he's assertive, but was he to that extent?"

His assertiveness was not ordinary. Even if the Emperor came, he was the kind of person who would bravely say that he didn't like what he didn't like. What would status and authority mean to him, who was not human? There had been a reason why he had seemed to strangely transcend such things since his previous life. As he quietly answered affirmatively to these thoughts, Kishiar chuckled lightly.

"I haven't had many personal conversations with him, so I don't know much. What kind of person is he, from your perspective?"

At Kishiar's question, Yuder found himself unable to answer immediately. Perhaps because he had learned some shocking facts about Enon today, the question felt difficult.

Just then, the servants Kishiar had summoned arrived, interrupting their conversation momentarily. Yuder looked down at the fist-sized bread piled before him. The crust was extremely tough, but the pale and soft crumb exposed after peeling the crust was a characteristic of Western-style bread. He suddenly thought that the hard yet soft aspects of this bread were like Enon.

"Enon is... I think he's like this bread."

"...Bread?"

Kishiar, who was about to pick up a piece of bread, asked as if he didn't understand.

"Yes. He's hard on the outside but not on the inside, they seem somewhat alike."

Upon understanding why Yuder said so, Kishiar laughed for a long time.

"I see... That's an interesting analogy. I'm jealous that you express a deep faith that I can feel."

Yuder blinked at the unexpected words that followed the laughter.

"Jealous, of what?"

"The person who knows aspects of you that I don't, and lends a hand when you're struggling, earning your trust. It's natural to be jealous."

It was a statement that Enon would shudder and run away from if he heard, yet it seemed genuinely sincere rather than just a joke. Yuder felt slightly bewildered, as this was the first time Kishiar had said something like that in his two lifetimes.

"Even if you say there are aspects you don't know... There's nothing special. And it's not just Enon I trust."

"The aspects you say are nothing special are what I'm curious about."

Kishiar smirked, taking a sip of the alcohol he poured into his cup.

"And don't worry, I'm not being petulant. I am indeed curious about the parts I don't know, but there's something else I'm more curious about."

"...What is it?"

"You've been overly cooperative since this morning, so I wondered if there's been a change of heart."

Once the bewildering topic passed, this time it felt as if an expected mountain had appeared. Yuder pressed his lips together, feeling the piercing red gaze trying to see through his gentle demeanor. He must've noticed the change in his behavior throughout the day, and Yuder had anticipated a comment on it.

"Did someone say something to you while I was not around this morning?"

"No."

"Then?"

"Just... I decided to be like this."

"I remember distinctly stating that I would take full responsibility."

"I understand that. However, I believe this issue is unrelated to your willingness to bear responsibility."

The words he had prepared in advance flowed out resolutely from his mouth.

"Once I take up a role, I don't wish to hide behind the Commander, letting things pass without doing anything."

"You know, it's funny. Just when I thought you'd finally accept things quietly, you're harboring such thoughts."

Kishiar slowly shook his head.

"Those rumors mean nothing to me. You understand, don't you? Adding one more issue to Duke Peletta's reputation wouldn't make it any worse. Even considering all that, why feel uncomfortable standing behind me while I handle everything I've calculated?"

"I understand that as well. But isn't it also true that you're trying to handle the rumors far more than you initially planned?"

The Cavalry members, who still didn't quite understand the ways and motives of the nobility, simply found this role-play amusing, or didn't ponder the consequences that would follow. But in Yuder's eyes, Kishiar seemed to be orchestrating things so that he would bear everything alone. As he had promised to take responsibility for any issues that might arise from this matter, he was perfectly shielding Yuder from others' views.

If he had only accepted that quietly, he wouldn't have been led down the same path as his previous life. Neither would Yuder Aile's name have been tarnished, nor would he have felt discomfort from the stares surrounding him.

However, that was it.

"Don't think I'm unaware. So I'll also act faithfully to my role as much as I can. That would maintain the balance we originally planned."

"Even when there's no need for that? Why choose the more difficult path?"

"Commander, you're the one who convinced me that taking on this role wouldn't only bring me trouble. As I remember, you persuaded me because you wanted my cooperation. So why are you trying to stop me?"

"..."

"If it's a difficult path for me, it must be a difficult path for you too, Commander. I want to move in a direction that can help you, not a direction that's comfortable for me."

Kishiar fell silent. His face was speechless.

"...Indeed, I have nothing to say about that."

"..."

"I expected to enjoy this unchanged state until this matter was resolved. Even the hilariously stubborn self-proclaimed conservative nobility of the West would be made fun of, and it was an opportunity to show my assistant, who sometimes worries about me too much, a reliable image. I won't deny that."

Kishiar set down the glass he was holding. There was an inevitable smile and sigh in his gaze as he looked at Yuder.

"But of course, you never move as I anticipate."

For the first time, Yuder sensed that he had gained something akin to victory in his verbal duel with Kishiar. Yuder finally smiled.

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"An unseen arrow flies farthest."

Citing an old saying that an unexpected attack is the strongest, Kishiar let out a long breath. The man who wiped his mouth with a napkin opened his mouth with an indescribable expression.

"...How's the fever you had earlier?"

"I'm fine now."

Having conversed with Kishiar, Yuder's sudden fever had subsided. As Yuder answered affably, the man gave a faint smile and nodded.

"If that's the case, go wash up first. I'll have to order more drinks after I clean up the leftover dishes."

"Aren't you drinking too much?"

"What can I do? Today, I took a big hit, so I'll drink and get a good night's sleep. And oh, tell Enon from the medical division that I've accepted his request."

Kishiar added, however, that as Yuder had feared, there could be dangers involved in examining the monster. Thus, whenever Phetuamet was examined, he must have Nathan Zuckerman at his side.

"I understand. Enon will be grateful."

"I should be the one thanking him, for striving so hard to heal you, like bread."

The phrase 'like bread' caught Yuder's attention.

"Please refrain from using that phrase in front of others."

"What's wrong with being like bread? Isn't it good? I like those kinds of people. The type that, like an uncut gem, reveals its true value with continued proximity and polish. Hard to recognize at first glance, but that makes them all the more valuable."

Seeing his face gently laughing, softer than usual, Yuder thought of someone.

"Are you talking about Zuckerman?"

"Hmm... Yes, Nathan does fit that description."

Kishiar responded, chuckling with a strange expression.

"I was talking about you, though."

"..."

"Oh, you never even considered it?"

Yuder was taken aback. He hadn't expected this. The metaphor of a gemstone felt much more apt than bread. Even so, the expressions Kishiar had used were far too direct and passionate compared to Yuder's own. Suddenly feeling a surge of overwhelming emotion from within, Yuder quietly rose from his seat. At that, Kishiar burst into laughter.

"You're so modest about yourself, but how come you manage to uncover plans I thought you wouldn't notice?"

As Yuder turned to leave, he remembered the voices of his companions, who had worried about him sharing a residence with Kishiar. He felt that their worries had manifested, but in a completely different way. In these moments with Kishiar, Yuder found the atmosphere far too intense, almost overwhelming.

Turning

Chapter 338

'Another fever?'

Heading to the bathroom, he touched his neck which felt slightly hot, but he couldn't be sure.

Was this warmth due to the medicine Enon gave him?

Was the previous fever also truly because of it?

Darkness loomed before his eyes, as if immersed in pitch black.

Lost in the haze, Yuder suddenly realized he was lying face down. He never slept in that position. It was strange. As he tried to adjust and rise, someone from behind pressed down on his waist, halting his movement.

Moving his heavy arm to reach behind, his wrist was grabbed and he was pushed down again. At the same time, the bed beneath him quivered, sending a strange sensation throughout his body. Before his mind could recognize what it was, his senses followed the origin of the sensation, rushing downwards.

Below his waist, deeper, and even deeper.

From that depth, an intense shock surged, filling his body with warmth. His heart raced at an incomparable speed, pumping blood fervently. Overwhelmed by the sensation, a breathless gasp escaped from his open lips.

"Ahh..."

It was then he realized the situation he was in. The cold leather gloves pinning his wrists, and the intrusion inside him announced his undeniable presence.

Kishiar.

As the name flashed across his mind, he felt sweat forming all over. A burning sensation filled his head, making everything blurry. His body involuntarily tensed due to an overwhelmingly stimulating scent.

As a force entered deep within him, the sensation inside responded with a pronounced movement. A natural and familiar rhythm, digging deep and then retracting, elicited another gasp from him. Biting his lips did no good to suppress it.

And then, the rhythm continued.

In a world where everything seemed swallowed by darkness except the sensations, his heavy breathing and the breath from the figure behind him felt like the only signs of life. The pleasure was sharp as a knife and deep as a mire. It felt like being wrapped by a boneless sea creature, dragged to hell, then frantically surfacing for air only to be dragged down again.

His mind screamed at the unbearable stimulation, desperately seeking escape, but his body remained still, wrapped up in the movements from behind. His skin seemed to welcome the sensation, letting out sweet cries.

In the midst of such overwhelming confusion, the place he was in seemed to distance itself, echoing with screams. Even as his mind clouded and strength left his hands, the grip on his wrist remained strong.

As his breathing quickened, the initially cold leather became warm, sending shivers down his spine. Clenching his teeth, he couldn't prevent the noises that escaped him. What was once unfamiliar began to merge with him, becoming indistinguishable. Like metal being continuously forged upon an anvil, he felt beaten and reshaped.

No matter how much he struggled, all he wanted to hide was becoming more exposed, showing its true self.

Being beaten.

Being exposed.

Rejection. Or ecstasy. Or something else.

His consciousness slowly faded, and strength left his previously hunched body. The hand that was pressing against his waist, when he regained awareness, had unknowingly burrowed into his chest. An unknown liquid, whether it was sweat or something else, scattered with heat over the half-buried cheek on the sheet. Unable to endure any longer, Yuder grasped the hand that was embracing his body.

In a desperate scratch that seemed like a plea, the strained glove was half-peeled off. The exposed back of the hand, much longer and larger than Yuder's, had bulging bones, and lacked any feel of flesh. The hand changed direction, gripping Yuder's fingers firmly, making them immobile. A surge of heat overcame him, and a shiver pierced his brain.

At the same time, the blade that had been prodding his insides finally overstepped its bounds.

His head grew light and his eyes moistened involuntarily. Overwhelmed by the tremendous sensation that struck his entire body, Yuder slumped. The pain brought an ecstasy akin to death. His mind went blank, losing grip of who he was, where he was. It was a brief moment, yet it felt so long it was almost unbelievable.

Two hearts beat in unison without missing a beat. A sensation of countless thin tendrils wrapping tightly around him made Yuder lose consciousness for a while.

When he came back to his senses, the inner turmoil persisted. With a horrible tingling pleasure, his vision blurred.

The wet sensation that drenched his abdomen and trickled between his legs felt distant. As he lay there gasping for breath, an approaching finger carefully traced his parted lips. In such a situation, the contact was unbelievably slow.

No matter how Yuder tried to avoid it, when that persistent entity finally reached inside his lips, with the last of his strength, he bit down. The finger hesitated for a moment but didn't dodge the feeble attack. Only when strength left Yuder's jaw did the finger retreat.

He felt drained, as if on the verge of death. His heart raced uncontrollably, and his lungs inflated and deflated to their limits without respite. As he shut his eyes and gasped for air, the intertwined bodies gradually separated.

'...'

Each time what hadn't faded slowly ebbed away, the things that had filled him up flowed out between his legs. His trembling body clenched its teeth, pausing the egress momentarily.

That moment.

Unable to bear that moment of hesitation, Yuder reached behind, grabbing and pulling something harshly. With a jolt and overlapping movement, what was half out slid back, piercing inside.

Unable to bear the shock, the two bodies collapsed intertwined onto the sheet.

Yuder, feeling the weight stack behind him, heard a noise escape his own lips.

Yes. More.

"..."

His mood was terrible from morning.

Yuder stared blankly at the ceiling, his eyes wide open. Without even pulling the covers, he knew what had transpired underneath. He wasn't a young boy from a distant past, who would wet his bed without doing anything. Rising in his current age with such arousal was inexplicable. Embarrassed beyond belief, he had no desire to get up.

'Why such a dream?'

His dreams of a past life had occurred several times before, but never had he dreamt so vividly of an intimate relationship. It was simply, as the saying goes, a dream about doing it over and over again, though he couldn't recall when exactly.

'...For the first time, I want to believe it's not a memory from my past life.'

He remembered having done it to the point of exhaustion, but he never felt particularly enthusiastic about it. However, the dream was entirely different. The last voice echoing in his head was sticky and wouldn't fade away.

Glancing to his side, Kishiar was nowhere to be found, having seemingly already risen. He felt a slight bruise to his pride, having never seen him sleep or wake up, but under the circumstances, it felt like a blessing.

Casually sniffing his wrist, he detected a faint scent, somewhat more robust than usual. It wasn't the sign of an approaching heat period, but it was definitely warm.

'If this is because of the medicine Enon gave me, then what the hell am I supposed to say?'

With a sigh, Yuder took his time to calm himself down before finally getting up. By then, Kishiar appeared, dressed in fresh clothes, with damp hair, greeting him with a smile.

"You're up? You slept in later than usual."

"...Yes."

Seeing the face he least wanted to encounter in such a situation first thing in the morning was a humbling experience.

"So, today... Will you be following the traces of the knights sent by Baron Willhem, as you mentioned yesterday?"

"That's a task for Nathan."

Turning

Chapter 339

Kishiar, who'd casually mentioned having other business on his side, suddenly tilted his head upon catching sight of Yuder's face.

"Why do you look so pale?"

The moment Kishiar reached out, Yuder felt a shiver run down his spine reflexively. Without even realizing, Yuder retreated, avoiding the outstretched hand. Even though he knew that the hand in front of him wasn't clad in the cold glove from his dream, the memories from that dream resonated from beyond his conscious mind, ringing in his head. All his efforts to calm his mind seemed fruitless. Yuder avoided Kishiar's gaze and mumbled while staring at the floor.

"I'm sorry. It's nothing."

"It doesn't seem like nothing."

Kishiar, always quick to catch on, clearly wasn't buying the excuse.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

For a moment, Yuder clenched his fist, then slowly released it. Red pupils, which he couldn't see in the dark depths of his dream, were now looking at him, full of concern or perhaps scrutinizing him. His mouth felt dry, and his palms sweaty.

"Yes."

"It happens. A change of environment can sometimes bring about nightmares."

Kishiar responded gently, as if it were truly no big deal.

"Do you also have nightmares, Commander?"

"I'm human, of course I do."

Even though it was an obvious statement, given the circumstances, it somehow felt very strange. Kishiar, seeing Yuder remain silent, didn't reach out anymore and instead crossed his arms.

"I plan to attend the salon of the western nobles I was invited to today. But if you're feeling unwell or have a headache, you don't need to join me. You can stay here."

"It's not that bad."

"It's alright. It might actually be easier for everyone to misunderstand that it's better for you to stay here for a day."

Kishiar suggested that if needed, he could call Lusan and Enon over for a check-up. The tender reassurance, something Yuder thought he would never receive from this man, left him at a loss for words. Trying to appear as composed as possible, Yuder spoke.

"I don't even remember what I dreamt about now. I don't think I need to be examined just for that. I'm truly fine."

"Just because something isn't visible doesn't mean it doesn't exist. My assistant seems to still need to learn more about self-care. So, rest today, as I suggested."

"Is that an order?"

"It's a request."

"..."

"I brought you here so you could rest in a comfortable place. Have you forgotten?"

In the end, Yuder couldn't out-argue Kishiar. He stood by a window that overlooked the outside, watching Kishiar's carriage leave. Thanks to Kishiar's orders to the servants before his departure, a generous amount of food sufficient for at least three people filled the table. The curious glances of the servants, wondering why Yuder remained alone, felt prickly on his back, but he pretended not to notice and lost himself in thought.

'Was that dream truly my memory?'

The sensations from the dream began to fade swiftly after he woke up and were now quite vague. However, the shock of seeing himself, like a beast overpowered by instinct, growling, biting, scratching, repelling, and then being drawn back, was still vivid.

Did he really behave like that? Was that really him? It wasn't just the other side that acted like a beast blinded by desire.

In his previous life, Kishiar had been so tenacious that once he started a relationship, he hardly let go. No matter how hard he tried, he would often find himself on the brink of losing consciousness before the night ended. Still, since the accident during the manifestation of his second gender when he clung for days as if in a delirious state, he felt he had never lost control of his consciousness so severely. Had that too been a misconception?

'Anyway, whether that dream was a memory of my previous life or not... One thing is certain.'

Yuder stood up, reflecting on the dream. It meant that the scene in the dream had stirred him deeply.

How could he have felt that way during such a dream?

"..."

A throbbing pain resided behind his eyes. Yuder touched his throat gently, exhaling deeply.

'Perhaps... having newly recognized my desire for Kishiar is what led me to this dream.'

Once begun, there's no turning back. Yuder Aile's feelings for Kishiar La Orr had advanced to a point where it was challenging to contain.

Perhaps the dream served as a warning, urging him to reflect and realize the reality once again. If the desire he thought was new wasn't new at all, then what awaited at the end? Perhaps everything he believed was changing was not, and he was merely repeating the same descent into ruin.

With that thought...

Yuder looked down at his sweaty palms. While no qualification was needed to desire and yearn for someone, he felt he was the least suited for such intense passion.

'I'm overthinking because of a dream. Enough of this.'

The coldness that had enveloped him seemed to have cooled most of the lingering heat inside, but a trace of it remained, discomfoting him. Yuder gazed long in the direction Kishiar's carriage had disappeared before turning away.

"Yuder. Are you planning to stay in bed all day because you spent an intense night with the Commander?"

"Who said that?"

"Who else? The servants who've been glaring at this room all day, their eyes almost popping out."

Not long after finishing his meal, Ever visited. Offering Yuder a small green apple she'd brought, she marveled at the luxury of the room.

"Wow. I thought our room was great, but given that this is the Commander's quarters, it's incredible. How many rooms are interconnected?"

"Six in total, including the bathroom."

"How's the bathroom?"

"See for yourself."

Only after inspecting even the bathroom facilities did Ever return satisfied.

"It's incredible. You could swim in the tub. Have you tried?"

"No."

Thanks to Ever's cheerful voice, Yuder's headache began to subside. Biting into the apple Ever had given him, he inquired about her visit.

"Why did you come all the way here? I thought you went to investigate the rumors."

"I intended to, but we received letters from the people left in Great Sarain Forest. I came to deliver it before going out. And to check if you're genuinely unwell."

"I'm perfectly fine, so you don't have to worry about that."

“I mean, people are truly strange. Once they hold a prejudice, whether Commander and Yuder are together or apart, they must seem odd. I appreciate their easy acceptance, but the fuss they make over it...”

Yuder accepted a few letters she handed to him. Three in total: one each from Gakane, Kanna, and Jimmy. Although they were all delivered by express courier and thus quite small, the letters inside were densely written.

Gakane wrote that he had encountered several monsters in the Great Sarain Forest, but had quickly dispatched them. By the time Yuder read the letter, Gakane mentioned plans to expand his range and hunt monsters in other areas. Yuder had thought that it would be easier for Gakane to lead the members than deal with the Western Mage Union, but Gakane seemed to find the latter easier than expected.

“The mages say that the current monster activity is at the level that was typical in previous years. It seems the news of the decreased monster disturbances has spread. Now, we're seeing more high-ranking individuals and mercenaries, and the mages say that more of them will come from other regions. But what's surprising is the number of people who approach us directly to express their gratitude. The small trade hubs reportedly established by the Tain family remain quiet, but we must continue to monitor them.”

After updating the situation, Gakane concluded his letter by inquiring about Yuder's health. He showed no signs of curiosity about Tainu's condition or about the circumstances of Baron Willhem.

Next was Kanna's letter. The content was similar, but it included details only she would mention.

“Yuder, having read more detailed reports here, it seems certain that the Tain family was involved in illegal trades, including human trafficking. I've reported the specifics to Commander, so you'll hear it from him, but the details are truly horrifying. I also gleaned a small hint on where the Star of Nagran might be, and it might not be far from where you are.”

Kanna's handwriting was a bit clumsier than Gakane's. She had only properly learned to write after joining the Cavalry. But Yuder felt a warmth in her awkward script. He could almost hear her voice, filled with deeper concern than Gakane's, and it made him smile faintly.

"I assume by now you should have sight in both eyes. I really worry that you'll just work and not rest properly. I've asked Sister Ever to watch over you, but I won't be at ease."

Kanna planned to depart for Tainu after finishing her task of reading the information there. She emphasized that he should be even healthier by the time they met again, and warned him against lying in his reply, or she'd see right through it.

Lastly, the letter from Jimmy, although filled with clumsy grammar and misspellings, brimmed with passion. He recounted several times, with evident excitement, the story of a monster he faced in the Great Sarain Forest and asked to spar with Yuder when they next met. The letter also contained a few words from other comrades, as relayed by Jimmy.

"What does it say?"

Waiting for Yuder to finish reading, Ever's expression was soft, as if she already knew the answer.

"I've learned that you're going to watch over me, at Kanna's request."

"She promised me a dress she made herself as payment. So, I'm going to take this task very seriously."

Ever playfully waved her own letter in front of him.

Turning

Chapter 340

While Yuder was deep in conversation with Ever about the letter, a sudden knock interrupted them. Without waiting for a reply, the door was abruptly flung open, revealing the lord of the mansion they were staying in: Baron Willhem.

Accompanied by a group of his servants, Baron Willhem's gaze swept across the room, settling momentarily on Ever, then on Yuder. His eyebrows knitted ever so slightly. Although he attempted to maintain his composure, the icy coldness in his eyes was unmistakable.

"Hmm. I heard you were too ill to accompany the duke, but you look perfectly well to me."

Ever concealed her displeasure and tucked away the letter. Rising calmly from her seat, Yuder addressed the Baron.

"What brings you here, Baron?"

"How rude of you. To speak without even greeting..."

"Understandable," the Baron interrupted, "Even if he's been directly honored by the Emperor himself, he might not be accustomed to formalities yet."

A servant by Baron Willhem's side pointed out Yuder's disrespect, but the Baron dismissed him with a wave, feigning a magnanimous tone that didn't align with his true demeanor.

"I have matters to discuss with you. I couldn't notify you earlier as this seemed like the only opportune moment. Shall we have a private conversation?"

The suggestion was phrased politely, but its tone was unmistakably commanding.

'He wants to talk.'

If he visited without notice, especially in Kishiar's absence and with only Yuder present, the intent was clear. Ever shot a sharp glance at Baron Willhem, then turned her attention to Yuder.

"...Yuder."

Her brief call held a plea, a wish for him to stay regardless of what Baron Willhem might say. In response, Yuder gave her a brief nod, signaling that everything was okay.

"Very well. Ever, once our conversation is over, I'll seek you out. Would that be acceptable?"

"Understood. I'll be in the reception room. See you later."

Ever rose, offering a cursory nod to Baron Willhem, and left the room, a cold gust following in her wake. Baron Willhem, looking displeased at her departure, signaled for his servants to approach.

Only after they meticulously dusted off the chair Ever had occupied did the Baron seat himself with a flourish of his mustache.

"Ever since learning that you're the hero of the Great Sarain Forest, I've been eager to meet you personally. Fortunately, this opportunity came sooner than expected. You might already know, but I'm Joseph Willhem."

"I am Yuder Aile."

While Baron Willhem went on about the illustrious history of the Willhem family, stewards of Tainu for roughly eight generations, Yuder paid little heed. His only concern was when the Baron would get to the point.

"...Thus, the abnormal monster occurrences beyond the western border this year, which began to infringe upon the Great Sarain Forest, were of great concern to me. I genuinely want to thank you for resolving that issue."

'Is he finally getting to it?'

Just as Yuder was contemplating the idea of gazing outside due to the sheer monotony of the conversation, Baron Willhem broached the topic of the monsters.

"That's not true."

"I've heard that you single-handedly defeated these monsters but were injured in the process. Is that true?"

Baron Willhem's gaze lingered noticeably on Yuder's left eye. Yuder, maintaining a neutral expression, met the Baron's eyes and nodded.

"Yes."

"Even so, having to follow all the way here instead of heading straight back to the capital, it seems Duke Peletta truly values you. How else would he offer his own residence?"

"..."

While it was phrased in a manner of admiration, the underlying meaning was, 'After all the hardships, how humiliating it must be to be held by Duke Peletta.' Yuder remained silent, prompting Baron Willhem to lean in and whisper in a voice feigning sincerity.

"A talent like you, set to lead our Empire, shouldn't be wasted sitting in a place like this. Duke Tain, impressed by your achievements, has mentioned he shares the same sentiment."

"Is that so?"

"Can you believe he speaks so progressively about the Awakener? But it's quite understandable."

Deciphering Yuder's reaction, Baron Willhem began to extensively praise Duke Tain. Amid his words suggesting Duke Tain was adventurous and could overlook minor flaws for something of value, Yuder easily discerned his true intent.

'Someone who's invested all his assets in high-risk ventures would, of course, be audacious. Hoping for success while turning a blind eye to potential pitfalls is a typical trait of such people.'

In his previous life, Duke Tain had lived comfortably even after Emperor Katchian's ascension. His family was implicated in an illegal fighting arena scandal, but they were proven uninvolved. Keeping a low profile in the capital due to personal businesses, Yuder never had any reason to be wary of him. But in hindsight, it seemed clear that the support and endorsement of other nobles, including Katchian, allowed him such peace.

Emperor Katchian despised any potential threats, yet showed mercy to those who kept a low profile and collaborated. Among the four ducal families, Duke Tain, who had always prioritized imperial matters without causing any threats to the Emperor's authority, had played his cards right.

Normally, Yuder wouldn't have given it a second thought, but the mention left a bitter taste in his mouth because it reminded him of Kishiar.

"...What do you think? Any thoughts?"

Distracted by his memories of the Tain family, Yuder had missed some of Baron Willhem's words. The Baron, noticing Yuder's silence and watching him carefully, tried not to appear intimidated and raised his voice.

"Of course, arranging a meeting with Duke Tain might not be easy. But opportunities don't come often. I'll lay the groundwork; all you have to do is return to the capital and await contact. It shouldn't be that hard, right?"

"So, you're saying... Duke Tain wants to meet me?"

"Exactly."

Baron Willhem finally smiled, sensing they were on the same page. Yuder, however, did not reciprocate. It was almost absurd how this situation was playing out exactly as Kishiar had feared.

"I'm sorry, but that will be difficult."

"What?"

"I am an assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. Everything I've done was out of duty in my capacity there, nothing more. If the Duke wishes to contact me, please speak with the Commander first."

The Baron's eyes widened, his face reddening whether it had to do with Yuder or not.

"What... What's wrong with the Cavalry? Are you suggesting that it should take precedence over the words of Duke Tain right now?"

"So, are you saying that I shouldn't prioritize the wishes of the Commander of the Cavalry, Duke Peletta, over yours?"

For a moment, Baron Willhem was at a loss for words.

'This guy?'

He had assumed Yuder would want to break away from Duke Peletta, hence his attempt at persuasion. He never expected this kind of response.

Logically, Willhem should've been looking down at his counterpart with a calm demeanor, while the latter should've been anxiously hanging on his every word. Yet, the Baron was the one struggling to mask his emotions. Yuder, on the other hand, added insult to injury with his audacious words. Willhem tried to contain his emotions, suddenly realizing he shouldn't underestimate his opponent.

He quickly opened his mouth, trying to hide a vague unease.

"Why do you speak such nonsense? You know that's not what I meant. How can you achieve anything with such rigidity? From your perspective, it might seem like you're defying Duke Peletta, but I assure you, there's nothing to worry about."

"So, you're saying I can tell the Duke about this proposal?"

"No, no! Not that!"

Yuder, watching the flustered Baron Willhem, coldly smirked to himself. From the moment Willhem proposed something that shouldn't be disclosed to Kishiar, it was clear his 'worry-free, good proposal' was anything but. How foolish did he think Yuder was?

"Don't tell His Highness, Duke Peletta, that I told you this. I'll take care of that! So, what I'm trying to say is..."

"My Lord, my apologies for interrupting. There's an urgent message from the mansion."

Suddenly, a servant appeared at the door. The composed man with black hair contrasted sharply with the red-faced, leaning Willhem. The servant momentarily hesitated, then, responding to an impatient inquiry, finally spoke.

"My Lord, the First Prince of Tain Family has just arrived here."

"The First Prince?"

Baron Willhem jumped up in shock.

"Duke Tain never sent any notice... What on earth is happening?"

"I'm not sure. The lady of the house is with the prince and awaits you."

"I understand."

Responding swiftly, Willhem turned to Yuder, "An unexpected situation has arisen. We'll pause our discussion for now. But think carefully about what I've said. I'll call upon you again."

After they departed, Yuder sat for a while, pondering the recent events. Clearly, it had nothing to do with Baron Willhem's proposal.