

## Turning 371

### Chapter 371

Arrogant and sharp as a blade, the voice of Duke Tain's craftiness did not make the Southerner flinch or cower in fear.

"You may be angry right now at Duke Pelleta's wickedness, but please look at the big picture. Wasn't the task you started already predicted to be a difficult venture? If the Emperor's gaze is drawn to the rats instead of Your Highness, this could actually be seen as a great fortune."

"I had anticipated that avoiding the Emperor's attention would be the biggest obstacle in this venture. But no matter what, this is too much."

Duke Tain scratched away at the words he had penned with a disgusted expression.

"Your Highness. Did you not say that opportunity comes with crisis? Whether the Cavalry catches those tenacious rats or not, divert attention to them as much as possible. Then Your Highness can take what you desire without issue. When they dance upon the shadow of an illusion-like honor, you will laugh without losing anything."

The Southerner finished speaking and sipped the tea in front of him.

Duke Tain rolled his eyes and clenched his jaw. His anger had not completely subsided, but the more he mulled over the Southerner's words, the more correct they seemed.

"Yes... you're right. Whether I turn a crisis into an opportunity is in my hands. There's no need to waste valuable money and manpower where it's not needed."

"Thank you for accepting my advice calmly."

"It's far better to listen to you, Athon, than those who can't even do their job properly and are only greedy."

The voice of the annoying Baron Willhem, who had been nagging for days to send more Knights and complaining about lack of money, came to the Duke's mind and then disappeared. Even his

cousin Theo, who never seemed to listen to his words, was better than that guy, but lately, nothing about his work had been satisfactory.

Who could be sure that a good result would come from giving more support to a man who, despite having all the resources of Tainu, had not completed a single task properly? The truth was that most of the finances were tied up, and it wasn't even a situation where support could be given, but the Duke didn't take that part seriously.

He felt much more at ease deciding to listen to the Southerner's words. The Duke relaxed and leaned back comfortably in his chair.

"I'll have to tell Willhem to leave this matter to the Cavalry and focus only on moving the goods."

"What are your plans to accomplish this?"

"I'm thinking of using auctions and charity parties like last year. As before, send your top men to Tainu at the right time."

"You're entrusting this to us again?"

"Who else can I trust with this if not you?"

Upon hearing the Duke's reply, the Southerner bowed his head in a courteous manner.

"I am always grateful for the trust and grace you give to me, a humble merchant from the south. However... there is one problem."

"A problem?"

"It may be an unpleasant matter to discuss... may I speak of it?"

The Duke answered, irritably fiddling with a die, telling him to go on. Behind the veil hiding the Southerner's face, his hard-to-read deep blue eyes shone.

"I have not mentioned this to you, for fear of troubling you, Your Highness, but in truth, the internal opposition within our family, which disapproves of us, has grown much stronger than last year."

"What? Wasn't that issue already resolved last time?"

"Even though it seems like they follow His Highness' command on the surface, the watchful eyes on us have actually increased. Thus, if we go to Tainu again this time, there's a high risk we will end up with needless tails following us."

Duke Tain became angry and slammed the table again.

"Then what do you want me to do? No one in the family knows who the real master is!"

"If His Highness permits, we would like to be more cautious this time and contact those who are connected to us. They are people His Highness has met in the south before..."

Hearing the names of those mentioned by the Southerner, Duke Tain frowned.

"Yes... I do seem to remember them. They were southern mercenaries, weren't they?"

"Yes."

"Good. Do as you please."

"If we send them, additional preparation and expenses may be required. That part is..."

"Handle it as before, and don't bother me with the details."

At Duke Tain's indifferent reply, the Southerner faintly smiled.

"Yes. But is the First Prince still in Tainu?"

"There was no word of him coming, so probably."

The answer from the Duke revealed no hint of concern for his child.

“That’s fine, either way. I’m in the mood to play a game now. Athon, it’s only fun with you, so let’s play ten rounds and then leave.”

The place where they were seated was the hidden lounge of the most secretive high-end gambling house in the imperial capital. Duke Tain often visited here when he had conversations he couldn’t have elsewhere.

The Southerner followed Duke Tain, who was leaving through the hidden door of the lounge, with a cold expression that quickly turned to a faint smile. Amongst the laughter of the nobles engrossed in gambling and the faint fragrance of exotic scents, nobody noticed the brief change in his demeanor.

“Athon! Come over here quickly. Give me some advice on how much to bet.”

Duke Tain shouted loudly from afar, afraid that the Southerner would be a little late. The man erased his cool expression and walked over with the same pleasant smile.

At the same time, a robust servant who had been cleaning unusually long nearby quickly pushed the trash aside and slipped out the back door.

He headed to the kitchen where food was being prepared for the guests inside the gambling house. An experienced middle-aged chef, who was skillfully decorating dessert bread, wiped his hands on his apron and came out when he saw Devran. They entered a staircase hidden from others' view.

“Did you already check everything, Devran? That’s too fast.”

“The Southerner came out of the lounge with the ‘guest.’ They are gambling now, so there won’t be any changes for a while, Steiber.”

Steiber Rendley, the Sul’s Deputy Commander of the Cavalry, who was wearing chef’s clothing, clicked his tongue.

“We should still make sure, since the Commander has trusted us with this task in the capital.”

“How can we be more sure than this? There’s a limit to how much I can snoop around those high-ranking people, just having slipped in as a servant. If you’re so worried, Steiber, you should have done my part.”

“What can I do if I’ve already passed the age to be picked as an Awakener servant in a gambling house?”

A few days ago, Kishiar sent a secret letter to Steiber, who was guarding the Cavalry. Inside was the location of a hidden high-end gambling house deep in the capital, along with what Devran Hartude and Steiber Rendley needed to do.

With the enclosed fake identity, get undercover employment in the gambling house, and then locate and investigate the nobleman, Duke Tain, and the Southerner around him.

Why it was necessary to investigate not only Duke Tain but also the Southerner around him was not detailed. They merely guessed in secret that Kishiar, who had revealed the unforgivable sin of Duke Apeto to the world and was currently in the West after passing through the Great Sarain Forest, seemed to want to find out something related to the ruler of the West, the Tain family.

It would not have been too strange if the Commander, who had exposed Duke Apeto's inexcusable crime, had set his next target on Duke Tain's family. Though the idea of watching Duke Tain and his surroundings alone was somewhat daunting, what mattered was the fact that Kishiar had specifically designated them for this mission. The mere thought that their abilities had been distinctly recognized by the Commander made them feel a profound sense of responsibility.

The upscale gambling house frequented by nobles often hired cheap, commoner Awakener for security and labor cost savings. The robust and young Devran was easily hired, but Steiber, being older, had no choice but to enter as a cook.

The work wasn't particularly hard, but watching Duke Tain's surroundings at the gambling house had to be practically left to Devran, so Steiber's worries were not trivial.

"Anyway, about the Southerner who came today with the nobleman, he seemed different from the others who came with him before, even the nobleman's attitude towards him."

"What was different about him?"

"First of all, the time they spent together in the lounge was the longest, and... more than anything, it struck me that the nobleman seemed to trust him a great deal."

"Is that so? In what way?"

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"I've seen plenty of gamblers' antics in the village where I lived, so I know them well. Those obsessed with gambling don't listen to others, right? They do what they want. But the noble guest immediately questioned the fellow and even asked about the betting amount later on."

In other words, the meaning was that the noble's excessive reliance on the foreigner from the south who came with him that day seemed suspicious.

"Hmm... It does seem special indeed."

"That's what I'm saying. My intuition tells me he's the most suspicious."

After almost becoming the subject of Duke Apeto's experiments and being rescued by Yuder, Devran was more loyal and diligent in his training than anyone else. Although he was a bit rough in speech, his wild instincts developed through experience were to be trusted.

"I remember the name the noble called him. It was Athon. Since you agree with my opinion, Steiber, shall we follow him when he leaves the gambling house later?"

Devran said the man was not armed and did not seem to be a mage or an Awakener. After some thought, Steiber agreed.

But Devran couldn't carry out his intention. The Southerner, clad in clothing that looked suffocating just by looking at it, surprisingly did not even take a carriage when he left the gambling house and disappeared without a trace before they could follow.

...

Someone suddenly touched his cheek.

Startled, Yuder opened his eyes and realized that he had been half-asleep in the position where he was sitting. He seemed to have had a troubling dream, but he could not remember it well. It took him a moment to come back to reality, blinking blankly while the man who slapped him narrowed his brows and offered a faint smile in greeting.

"Did you sleep well?"

"...I apologize. I fell asleep without knowing you had arrived."

"It's natural, coming right after spending the night in a jail."

The cool touch of the hand passed over his cheek, sweeping the disheveled hair from his forehead. The cold yet gentle sensation finally woke him up completely.

Yuder looked at Kishiar, still holding the remnants of the chilly wind from outside, and exhaled deeply.

"I think I told you to lie in bed after the treatment. It seems you didn't even have the energy to go there. Will you lie down now?"

"No, I'm... I'm fully awake now."

Straightening his posture and thinking back to what he was doing just before falling asleep, the answer soon came to him.

'I was trying to think after hearing Enon's words... Maybe I dozed off because the stove was too warm.'

Fortunately, the sun was still high outside the window. It seemed he hadn't slept for too long.

"Did you finish talking with Baron Willhem, Commander?"

"For now."

Kishiar briefly answered, then added after a moment.

"The Duke of Tain's side said they would entrust us with all investigations related to incidents caused by the Awakeners from now on. If necessary, we can use the Tainu Knights and stationed troops, and they have also made clear their intention to let us handle the investigation headquarters we planned to set up in the public security management team."

The priority of investigating incidents caused by Awakeners had always been the Cavalry's job, so it was unclear what they were conceding, but it was good news anyway.

'In return, the Duke of Tain will now begin to secretly cover up secret trade deals and process them in his favor, out of everyone's sight.'

But that was precisely what Kishiar wanted, so it was something to be applauded.

Yuder opened his mouth, briefly conveying this intention.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

Kishiar slightly closed his eyes and smiled, suddenly placing something on Yuder's knee. It was a cookie box that was simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar.

"Nathan bought this yesterday, but now we can finally eat it. Shall we have a little while congratulating, and talk?"

Since they had already enjoyed a full breakfast that covered the tablecloth entirely, Yuder wasn't particularly hungry. However, he couldn't refuse the cookies in the box that Kishiar had opened. Kishiar, watching him with a smile, began to speak again.

"Graham Willhem regained consciousness and was able to talk. The intruders demanded access to the upper basement and the decryption of encrypted information."



"The internal information, is it related to what was stolen from the broken safe then?"

"It seems so, but Baron Willhem desperately wants to pretend that part never happened. I felt sorry for his efforts, so I played along for now. Of course, I plan to meet Graham again privately later."

Yuder nodded, recalling Nathan Zuckerman's report. It was clear that Nahan had not completely obtained the information he had taken from there. If he had been abducted last night, Graham Willhem would have quickly spilled all the information and then been killed.

"The members sent to the security management team have prepared a place to work, and Ever Beck finally found a place where they might be hiding and went to look, but unfortunately, they disappeared last night."

He also added that the signs of a hasty departure made it apparent that they hadn't been gone long. The fact that Ever wasn't seen when they returned earlier seemed to be because of that.

"If we don't find them now... they will surely appear again soon, won't they?"

"It seems so. Judging by the news that many top associations in Tainu will gather to hold an auction this year, it seems that Duke Tain doesn't think of delaying any longer."

Although they were called top associations, they were places where Tain's hand could have reached. Not long ago, Kishiar had predicted that the auction would be held again, and it had become an accurate reality.

In Kishiar's playful eyes, Yuder could easily guess what he was thinking.

'If the news of the auction is known, Nahan will certainly not be able to deny that it will be a golden opportunity. And it will be our best chance to catch both rabbits.'

Sometimes, even knowing the danger, there comes a time when one must step forward to bite the bait in front of one's eyes. The auction that Duke Tain would hold was like that, and such was the choice that Ershi and Nahan, who would see through the identity of that auction, would make.

And the person who made all those choices inevitably the best was right in front of me.

Yuder took a small breath, feeling his heart pound.

Driving prey towards a cliff without them knowing is not easy, not something anyone can do. Standing on a cliff designated by Kishiar's predictions, they were bound to consider that moment an opportunity, not a cliff, achieved through the best choice.

The pieces that had been moving beneath the surface gathered and fell into place as the man in front of him had predicted. How remarkable was it to see up close the spectacle of all the words unknowingly finding their place one by one?

The fact that the moments when the Star of Nagran and Duke Tain had to move inevitably for their respective purposes had suddenly loomed large before them felt strangely unfamiliar. It felt as though he had been asleep for days, even though he had actually only been asleep for a brief moment.

And as if reading such a strange feeling in Yuder, Kishiar spoke.

"Yes... If things continue like this, I'll probably be able to get both rabbits I wanted without a big problem. There were variables that were more turbulent than expected, but it's surprisingly perfect."

Perfect.

He was chewing on those words, repeating them in his mouth, when the following words were heard.

"And the reason I was able to seize this perfect timing is probably that someone voluntarily came forward to avoid tripping me and my Cavalry."

"..."

"Don't you think?"

Although he had said "someone," his red eyes were looking intently at just one place, to the point of bewilderment. Yuder opened his mouth awkwardly, blinking. Just making eye contact made the inside of his throat dry up again.

"...I didn't do anything this time."

"Really?"

"Shouldn't it be adjutant Zuckerman or... Ever who hears those words?"

"Of course, I'll praise them too after everything is over. But now is the time to praise the one who bore everything last night."

A white hand reached out and grabbed Yuder's hand.

"I kept thinking about what I could give to someone who would only feel burdened by anything material. It didn't seem fitting, as if he had become the poorest person in the world. All I can do at most is tell him verbally what he accomplished. And..."

Over the unveiled black stain, Kishiar silently pressed his lips. Yuder's fingertips shrank as if they were pricked by a knife, but the warmth that was pressed remained like a brand.

He wanted to tell him not to say such things.

He wanted to say that such praise, such greetings were not at all necessary for him.

Yuder Aile did not have the right to hear such words.

But all those words could not come out as sound from his mouth. Yuder, frozen in place, cast his eyes downward, painfully feeling the many holes inside himself.

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"How is Sir Aile's condition?"

“It's nothing serious, but he looks fatigued. I think he can't properly rest when I'm there, so I made sure he was lying down and then left.”

Kishiar walked ahead without hesitation, answering Nathan Zuckerman's question as he waited outside the lodging. Though he wore a habitual smile, Nathan noticed that his eyes were more subdued than usual and chose not to ask further.

“Have those from Pelleta arrived in Tainu? Where are they now?”

“They are on standby near the mansion, ready to come whenever you call, but Shuden [TL: From the previous Shuden Trading Company] wishes to see you as soon as possible.”

“Time is precious not only for them. It will be difficult today, so tell them to come tomorrow. What's the current situation in Tainu?”

“Since the city gates reopened and the square's entrance restrictions were lifted, things have been as usual. The Tainu Knights and soldiers are not very cooperative, but that seems to be handled well by the Cavalry, so we don't think we need to intervene.”

“Has any other information come from the place where the Star of Nagran lingered?”

“No. I'm sorry.”

“There's nothing to be sorry for. It's natural that tracking those who have hidden a village within the Great Sarain Forest for over a year is difficult. Anyway, there's already an expected answer to where they will appear, so it doesn't matter.”

However, the absence of Kanna Wand was a bit regrettable. Muttering to himself, Kishiar quickly let go of his attachment. He continued to ask various questions to Nathan Zuckerman, or gave brief instructions, and soon they were approaching the outside of the Mansion.

Suddenly, Kishiar stopped in his tracks.

“Why are you doing this?”

Despite Nathan's cautious inquiry, Kishiar gave no answer, lost in thought, staring somewhere. If it had been before, Nathan would have been alert, but now he did not. He quietly stood behind and waited for his lord to emerge from contemplation.

Kishiar had changed slightly since spending more time in the Great Sarain Forest than planned. He would process work quickly but occasionally stop as he was now, lost in deep thought.

His keen senses, honed from a long life at the bottom, still told Nathan Zuckerman much, even after obtaining a power that no one in the world needed to fear.

According to those senses, Kishiar's sudden deep thoughts were mostly related to Yuder Aile.

His lord's attitude toward that man had crossed a line since what had happened in the Great Sarain Forest. His behavior in Tainu afterward went without saying. Nathan felt an indescribable feeling, hidden behind frivolous yet meticulous actions that most people didn't find strange.

Yet the reason he didn't intervene was not simply because he judged it to be beyond his level. He knew all about how Yuder Aile had defeated the monster alone, the injuries he sustained, and the risks his lord took to treat them.

The Knights from Pelleta who found out how blindly and strangely their lord behaved toward the Cavalry's new assistant were surprised, but Nathan Zuckerman's surprise was a bit special. He had been somewhat at a loss on how to treat Yuder Aile since then. For someone who always acted with clear standards, there had never been a more difficult time.

“Nathan.”

Finally, Kishiar called his adjutant's name.

“Yes.”

“Have you ever disliked receiving praise from me?”

Taken aback by the unexpected question, Nathan was rarely flustered but soon lowered his head, expressionless.

"There was none."

"Yeah. Usually, that's the case... Then what's the criteria, I wonder."

The last words were almost inaudible, but not enough to deceive the Swordmaster's ears. What did the word 'criteria' imply? As Nathan Zuckerman alone did not understand the will of his lord and remained silent, Kishiar softly exhaled and began to walk again.

"That wasn't what I intended to ask you. Forget what I just said."

"...Understood."

Nathan Zuckerman silently followed Kishiar again. Yet, inside the loyal Knight, the existence of Yuder Aile fell into a deeper labyrinth.

The next morning at breakfast, Pruelle, Ever, and Nathan Zuckerman joined them. Although each had met before, this was the first time they were all together, so the atmosphere was a bit awkward. But Kishiar, who had arranged this meeting, was simply composed.

"We need to start working in earnest, so it seems good to know exactly who is who among those who will be on our side. Thank you for responding so quickly to the dinner invitation I sent last night."

"It's nothing."

Pruelle, who had settled separately in a chair with a small cat beside him, cheerfully bowed his head with a smile.

"Sir Aile. How's your body? Did you get enough rest yesterday?"

"Yes, thanks to you."

Yuder, sitting to the right of Kishiar, replied quietly. Ever, who was sitting next to him, finally opened her mouth with a slightly relaxed expression.

"I heard a little about the First Prince from the Commander when he came to assist with Yuder's investigation, but I was really surprised. I never knew you were an Awakener."

"Don't be surprised just yet. This little one here is the same."

Pointing at the cat with an unbelievably casual tone for a noble's son, Pruelle smiled, and a question appeared in Ever's eyes.

"Yes? Wasn't it just a pet cat...?"

Despite several people entering, the cat that had kept its place quietly and without much tension, mewed as if answering.

"That adorable cat is Pruelle's younger brother, Nipollen Van Tain. As you can see, an Awakener with the ability to transform into a cat."

Ever, who had been wearing an expression that she couldn't resist the cuteness of the cat since she first saw it, was deeply shocked.

"Originally, it's afraid of people, but after confirming that it's not very afraid of fellow Awakeners, we decided to take care of it. Prince Pruelle is soon to return to the capital."

"Yes?"

"Your Highness and Sir Aile know that Nipollen is human, but I asked earlier for some more trustworthy people. When we tried it this time, Nipollen seemed fine even in the presence of many Cavalry members. I thought it might be an unreasonable request, but I'm grateful you kindly accepted."

Pruelle stroked the little head of the cat and bowed his head in gratitude. Yuder recalled Pruelle, who had been with the cat when he returned from spending a night in jail, and thought he knew when the 'test' had been.

Ever repeated the word 'yes?' several times, but after hearing Pruelle and Kishiar's explanations, she seemed to finally accept Nipollen's true identity. Nathan Zuckerman, who found himself seated furthest from the cat, seemed content with understanding why, and showed no particular reaction.

"Then, today, at this gathering, we'll discuss to some extent the upcoming operation," announced Kishiar, changing the topic and turning his head towards Pruelle.

"Prince Pruelle brought some rather interesting news this morning."

"Ah, yes."

Pruelle, lifting his head, spoke with a smiling face.

"I believe you already know about the upcoming auction, but I have heard that at the same time, Baron Willhem is planning to host a charity party. That information was conveyed to me last night."

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"If it's a charity party... May I inquire precisely what kind of party it is?"

"It's a party with the purpose of inviting nobles from various places in Tainu and the western region, to enjoy festivities and raise funds for the development of the West. My father, the Duke of Tain, commands Baron Willhem to host it irregularly."

Listening alone, it was impossible not to see the blatantly obvious intentions of the Duke of Tain, who seemed to consider everything in the West as his own.

"I heard that last year, a similar party was held during an auction. At that time, guests from external merchants and the Willhem Family overlapped, and it was said to have been very chaotic."

"...And since the end of last year's auction, secretive 'items' have begun to reveal themselves, starting in the southern part of the Empire. New drugs, dangerous magic tools, even situations involving the beginning of illegal fight clubs trading foreign fighters."



It was hardly a subtle coincidence. Kishiar gently added, with a look that suggested he did not believe it to be a coincidence at all.

"I believe that many of those who visited last year are likely to come again this year. Therefore, I am currently gathering information about those who came to Tainu during last year's 'party' through those who provide me information."

Among those who came last year, there were certainly those involved in secret trade and buyers, so if he could find them, he would be able to quickly obtain the necessary information by comparing them with those coming this year. It was possible since Pruelle was of the bloodline of the House of Tain.

"Once the work is finished and I report to His Highness, I will return to the capital for a while. I'll try to come back as soon as possible, but please take good care of my younger brother Nipollen in the meantime."

Pruelle would immediately begin persuading the other forces within his family, including the rest of his siblings. What Yuder and the Cavalry needed to do was protect his precious youngest sibling, Nipollen, as promised, and grasp substantial evidence.

Having learned the extent of Pruelle's involvement in this matter, Ever looked at the cat with newly responsible eyes and nodded.

"Understood. I will do my best to protect Prince Nipollen. Could you tell me what to be cautious of when dealing with Prince Nipollen before you leave, if it's okay?"

"I was certainly planning to tell you separately... but it's quite reassuring that you brought it up first."

"Any Awakener who wants the protection of the Cavalry should naturally be cared for by me as a Deputy Commander. Feel free to tell me whenever."

Pruelle's eyes softened with relief. Yuder, looking at the rock-solid Ever, recalled her from his previous life.

'I remember, she often took charge of the adaptation training when new members joined. Did she have the same thoughts back then?'

Among the few original members who stayed with him after he became Commander, there was always an awkward tension between Yuder and them that couldn't be expressed in words. Though they worked well together, that wall never disappeared until the end. Back then, even showing a bit of personal interest in each other was something unthinkable.

The realization that he knew how she would develop her abilities and how she would change, yet only now grasped this aspect, was slightly bitter.

"Information about Prince Nipollen will be shared only with those present here and the other two Deputy Commanders. If Kanna comes back later, I'd like you, Ever, to pass it on."

"Understood."

Upon hearing Ever's reply, Kishiar wore a smile at the corner of his mouth and moved on.

"Based on the information received from Prince Pruelle, we will be extremely busy on the day of the auction and the party. The goal is to find out the whereabouts of the 'objects' that Duke Tain has hidden in Tainu by then, and to prevent all the Awakener groups targeting them. Currently, we plan to split into two groups..."

Could it have been because he momentarily recalled Ever's previous life? Yuder felt a tingling sensation on the back of his hand as he watched Kishiar smoothly explaining the plan ahead. Now, gloves hid his hand and fingertips, but those smoothly moving lips had once touched them.

The kiss that started politely by lifting the other person's hand and pressing down from the back of the hand to the fingertips often symbolized the ultimate affection. Typically, it was performed by those below to show respect, love, and acknowledgment to those above, but occasionally some monarchs paradoxically offered that kiss to their subjects. In any case, the act was never devoid of profound meaning.

It would have been better if they had kissed as usual. That would have been familiar. However, Kishiar had unabashedly lowered himself before Yuder. Even though he could understand why Kishiar had done so, the moment was so overwhelmingly emotionally painful. Perhaps it reminded him of a moment from his previous life.

Perhaps, a day like Yudrain Aile's appointment as the 2nd Cavalry Commander.

"..."

A fleeting memory from the past momentarily flowed through Yuder's mind and then vanished.

'What a useless thought...'

Afraid that his perceptive counterpart might notice, he looked down and turned his gaze, only to lock eyes with a cat on a chair. The cat slowly blinked its big eyes and wagged its tail's tip.

"...Finding the whereabouts of the objects involves going to Graham Willhem, and I think we'll need a little help from Prince Pruelle."

"If it's something I can help with, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Can you transform into Baron Willhem?"

Even as Yuder was lost in thought, the conversation flowed smoothly. Pruelle, hearing Kishiar's question, seemed to gauge something, closed his eyes, opened them, and then nodded enthusiastically.

"Of course, it's possible."

"You're confident it won't be noticed even by Graham, his brother?"

"That won't be a problem either. But if the Baron appears elsewhere while I'm going to Graham, it might arouse suspicion among the lower-ranking people. That part may be a bit tricky."

"I'll take care of that."

Kishiar's answer was imbued with an unwavering solidity, as if he had already thought everything through.

"It seems that because of the story about the Divine Sword used to rescue Graham, the senior priests from the Western Sun God Temple have decided to visit here. It's a private gathering, and the Baron

will undoubtedly be present. You'll go to Graham at that time. I'll send Nathan to let you know the details."

"Understood."

After exchanging a few more words, the meal came to an end. Before leaving, Pruelle called Ever aside for a moment.

"Deputy Commander Beck."

"Yes?"

"Actually, I have seen you at the Apeto Duchy trials held in the capital."

Upon Ever's response, indicating she didn't understand what Pruelle was referring to with a 'I see.', Pruelle hesitated for a moment before awkwardly smiling.

"...There were those who secretly tried to harm the victims during a brief recess in the trial. I was really impressed when you caught them on the spot and threw them on the courtroom floor."

"Ah... Yes. There was such a time. I didn't know you saw me that day."

Ever's ears turned red as she trailed off at the end of her sentence. Yuder recalled the time when she had told a similar story during early morning training.

"I'm really glad to have the chance to meet you here, the person I saw back then. By chance, when His Highness told you about me, did he also mention what my hopes are?"

"No..."

"My dream is to join the Cavalry after this affair is settled. It's my first dream, other than keeping my younger siblings safe. I wish I could stand with the Deputy Commander someday."

Ever blinked a few times. It was quite astonishing for the heir closest to inheriting the dukedom to say such a thing, but shortly after, she shyly yet refreshingly nodded and smiled.

"Yes, I hope that happens for you. If you have the ability to transform, sadly, you'll be going to the Steiber's Sul Division instead of the Shin Division I'm in charge of."

At that moment, Yuder saw a fleeting look of shock and disappointment flash like lightning over Pruelle's face, who had been acting so cleverly.

"Is there a big difference depending on the division?"

"Uh, well..."

"Prince Pruelle, may I ask something?"

Yuder stepped in, interrupting Ever, who seemed to be contemplating how to respond to the unexpected reaction.

"Uh, sure, why not... What is it?"

"When I briefly visited the prison, it seemed like I found something related to the 4th underground floor. I was wondering if you knew anything about it."

"The 4th underground floor?"

Pruelle finally recovered from his shock and turned his head. After hearing about Yuder's discovery of the Tain family's crest engraved on the wall on the 3rd underground floor, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"If the location matches the crest on the wall... there might be a high probability that the 4th underground floor actually exists."

"So it does exist for sure?"

"According to the book I gave to His Highness, it was definitely designed to be there."

Pruelle responded, recalling the memory.

"The first Duke Tain made that place after taking Tainu as his territory. It's said that he frequently conducted research there, even during political affairs."

Yuder's eyebrows raised at the word "research," and Pruelle quickly added:

"He was not well-known, but he was a mage. He was the disciple of the Archmage Luma. He didn't act as a mage, so it's mostly passed down as a record within the family... but there are records that Archmage Luma often visited Tainu to see him."

Yuder didn't know that the first Duke Tain was a mage. But Kishiar seemed to know, nodding and adding:

"Though he was the least talented of Luma's disciples, he was acknowledged for his ability to research. What he researched is unknown now... but perhaps the reason the prison is so large is that it also served as a research facility."

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It was a startling revelation that the first Duke of Tain had been a mage, and had a connection with the Archmage Luma. If this was true, then there was one person close to Yuder who might know the existence of the fourth underground dungeon floor even better than Pruelle.

"...Is it true that the first Duke of Tain was Luma's disciple?"

Enon, who had suddenly received a visit from Yuder, questioned back with a puzzled face. He had been in the midst of grinding herbs he had collected from somewhere.

"From what I know, all five of the Emperor's children were disciples of Luma at that time. Of course, there were almost none who learned fully to the end, but..."

"He had no talent but showed aptitude in research. I heard that Luma frequently visited him here. Have you ever seen him?"

"Hmm..."

Enon added a handful of herbs into a small dish, furrowing his brow.

"No, Luma kept my existence a secret. After Luma left, I paid no personal attention to the royal family or nobles, focusing only on my duties."

"Then the fourth underground dungeon floor might not exist either?"

"If it was in the design, the probability would be higher. Find a reliable mage and take him along with one of Tain's lineages. If there were Tain's family crest, there might exist a device that only those with the blood connection can open."

"There's such a device?"

"It was quite a common protective device in the past. Blood doesn't lie, after all."

Enon answered nonchalantly but suddenly stopped his nervous grinding of herbs.

"...But if that dungeon was originally for research purposes, and the lowest floor was concealed to such an extent, that first Duke of Tain might have been researching something quite prickly."

"Prickly?"

"Luma was secretly researching how to turn back time among other things, so why wouldn't another guy do the same?"

Yuder slowly nodded his head. In any case, it seemed right that Duke Tain was Luma's disciple, and if there was a high probability that the fourth floor existed, the 'item' that Duke Tain hid might also be there.

'I must first find the fourth floor and check the presence of the item, and then look for traces of the first Duke of Tain or Luma.'

"Enon. When I go to find the fourth floor... do you have any thoughts of going as well?"

Asked in case, Enon sharply opened his eyes and turned his head.

"You... are you thinking of going there? Even when your body hasn't fully healed yet?"

"No. It's not that I'll definitely go. But we have to find the fourth floor anyway."

"If it's necessary to protect the capital, maybe, but I won't do anything dangerous in other places. I'm not a madman like you."

Enon bluntly betrayed Yuder, then asked with a frowning face a moment later.

"More importantly, have you thought about what I told you?"

Yuder immediately knew what he meant. It was about a new 'method' to fully regain his strength, which Enon had told him about during a previous treatment.

"Hmm... I was actually going to hear more information and seek advice from the monster experts from Peletta that the Commander will meet today. You must come too, so get ready."

"Monster experts? What's that? I didn't hear about it."

Well, that would be the case. In fact, Yuder had come here to convey that story but he first asked about the Duke of Tain and the fourth underground floor.

"You heard it now, so it's fine."

"What's fine about that?!"

The conversation ended with a familiar shout. Yuder, having received a scolding to speak quickly if he had business, set out with Enon. Kishiar, who was waiting in the reception room, found them and stood up with a smile.



"The assistant who went to call the pharmacist hasn't returned for a while, so I was wondering what was going on. Shall we go now?"

"Yes."

In the carriage waiting behind the mansion, only Nathan Zuckerman, holding a small box wrapped in black cloth, was already aboard. He silently nodded to Yuder and Enon, who had come with Kishiar, but did not move from his position guarding the box. Nobody was unaware that inside the box was a small Pethuamet captured from the Great Sarain Forest.

Since Kishiar naturally had Yuder sit beside him, Enon sat next to Nathan. Yuder could see from Enon's uncomfortable expression that he truly did not want to be there.

"You probably already know, but the people we're meeting today are from my territory, Peletta. One runs a small business, and the other is the only mage in Peletta Knights. They gladly came, showing great interest when I asked for help on this matter."

Kishiar explained that both were well-experienced in dealing with monsters, and there was no worry of secrets leaking. Both were people that Yuder did not know in his previous life.

"I didn't know there was a mage in the Peletta Knights."

"They hardly ever actually do anything. They're a bit different from other mages."

As they were talking, the carriage quickly stopped. A small house not far from Baron Willhem's mansion was their destination.

Ordinary-looking soldiers who looked like the Peletta Knights saluted Kishiar. Yuder was newly impressed by the tact with which everything had been thoroughly prepared so as not to draw attention to the visitors from Peletta.

"You've arrived, my lord. I thought this old neck of mine would fall off waiting."

"Haha, if you can still travel by carriage, then you'll live healthily for another fifty years, Hellem."

"What's the use of living fifty more years? Still, I'm happy to see you in good health, my lord."

The one who greeted them inside was an elderly woman dressed in mage robes. Her small body looked even smaller standing in front of the tall Kishiar, but the eyes beyond her glasses sparkled no less than a young person's. Her gaze went from Nathan Zuckerman, who was holding the Pethuamet's cage, to Enon, and finally stopped on Yuder. Yuder somehow felt that she was studying his face very closely.

"But... where is Shuden?"

"That guy was up all night doing who knows what, so he overslept today..."

"Ah, Grandma, don't say it! Just wait a moment!"

A plaintive shout came from the second floor. Kishiar, understanding the situation, nodded and followed the mage to the place she had prepared. When Nathan Zuckerman placed the box containing the monster on the neatly cleared large table and unfolded the cloth, the old mage, who had been watching, suddenly smiled and spoke.

"Nathan. You seem taller. No one's been bothering you?"

"..."

Nathan Zuckerman responded with silence, but the atmosphere momentarily soured. Kishiar, who burst into laughter, bowed his head in defense of his adjutant.

"It seems to you that Nathan is still like his younger self. But now, no one dares do that."

"To my eyes, my lord, you don't seem much different either."

"Well, I suppose so."

Kishiar, who answered briefly, turned to Yuder and Enon.

"Hellem was originally from the court mage lineage. When I had to leave for Peletta, she was considering her retirement, so I found a good place for her to retire at just the right time."

"Speaking of retirement, he actually ordered me to work by his side until he died. Who would want to spend the rest of their life in such a cold and damp place? If monsters hadn't appeared here, he would never have called me," Hellem retorted, sticking out his tongue. Kishiar just laughed and did not refute the statement.

Yuder finally understood Kishiar's words that she was 'A bit different from other mages.'

'If she comes from the court mage lineage... they must have known each other since childhood.'

He became more curious about her history, which he hadn't seen in his previous life, but Hellem was a bit quicker to show curiosity toward Yuder.

"Hmm... Seeing your uniform, you must be the new assistant?"

"Yes. My name is Yuder Aile."

"You look more robust than I heard. Much healthier than my own grandson."

More robust than she'd heard? Where had she heard about him first? Although he had some guesses, it was the unfamiliar praise that made Yuder more perplexed. Yuder kept his mouth shut, and Hellem chuckled before exchanging a few words with Enon.

Enon maintained his usual gruff and brusque demeanor, but Hellem did not show any discomfort at his attitude. Rather, a hint of affinity was visible in her face as she said, "I've heard that you wanted me to look at that monster."

"It's ready."

Everyone's gaze turned to the cage, now unveiled by Nathan Zuckerman, who had removed several layers of cloth that had been covering the Pethuamet. Yuder saw the small Pethuamet nibbling on

vegetables within the magic-circle-drawn iron bars. It seemed a little plumper than when he'd seen it before leaving the great jungle, although he couldn't be sure if it was just his imagination.

"That's the monster. It's truly a creature I've never seen before."

Hellem, having pushed up her magnifying glasses, approached with great interest to examine the monster.

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"It moves on all fours, and it knows how to skillfully use its tail. A form that's somewhere between a beast and an insect... According to what you sent me before, it seems like it's hungry almost all day. Is that right?"

"That's what they say."

Kishiar replied, looking down at Pethuamet with an emotionless expression.

"It's a relatively common characteristic among monsters that absorb magic. They move by absorbing a small amount of magic that dwells in all things, using it as a source of energy."

As Hellem, who was circling around us examining Pethuamet, suddenly reached into her pocket and pulled out a glove. Yuder was startled and stepped forward, but Kishiar and Nathan remained calm.

"Is it okay?"

"The expert in this field is Hellem. It's rare to find someone who's been studying monsters for over 70 years and still has all limbs intact."

"Leave me be. I was enjoying the concern of a handsome young man for a change."

"Such a thing. You used to say that you didn't care for Nathan's and my concern, so it seems my assistant is to your taste? I've never lost to good looks, so this is a little disappointing."

Kishiar raised an eyebrow and smiled slyly at Yuder.

"Hellem doesn't compliment just anyone. It seems she quite likes the assistant."

"..."

Yuder avoided answering. Enon, who had caught his eye, was grimacing more than before.

"Now, shall we start the collection?"

Hellem tapped Pethuamet's head with her hand inside the cage. The monster, apparently angered by the interruption to its meal, let out a small threatening sound and whipped its tail, which had turned black. But the attack bounced off the glove, not causing any harm.

After repeating the same action a few times, Hellem deftly shook off Pethuamet, which had dangled from the end of the glove biting it, and turned away. Her expression, as she looked down at the glove smeared with the monster's venom, was incredibly calm, as if she had done this hundreds of times.

"Now, let's look at this side too."

Hellem, having taken off the glove, approached Yuder.

"You're tall, so it's hard to examine you. Sit down here."

"...Yes."

Yuder sat down as instructed. Hellem, who had come close to Yuder's left eye, lightly touched the top of her glasses. The ordinary-looking lens changed to a dark color, concealing her green eyes. As she fearlessly moved Yuder's jaw this way and that, Yuder swallowed a strange and embarrassing feeling.

"The traces of the poison absorbed are not completely gone, indeed."

Hellem, who had been peering into Yuder's unseen left eye, soon returned the lens color to its original state.

"I heard the monster follows you. Can I see it now?"

"Grandmother! You said to wait, but you've already gone through everything?!"

At that moment, someone ran down from the upper floor, huffing and puffing, and interrupted. The man, with his disheveled black hair like a bird's nest, was shameless even in the face of other people's stares. Looking at Pethuamet inside the enclosure, he quickly brightened and approached.

"Ah, you're the monster that even swallowed the magic circle, huh? Cuter than I thought?"

"Greeting your lord should be the priority."

Hellem frowned and spoke, and the man grumbled under his breath before turning around.

"Grandmother, it is Your Lordship, not mine. She always does this. Anyway... it's been a while, Your Highness. After hastily summoning me and making me wait for half a day, I had nothing to do but drink a little wine. I trust you'll overlook this much."

Despite an audacious attitude that was hard to believe, Kishiar rather smiled brightly.

"That's right. This one here is my assistant, Yuder Aile, and this one is Enon, a capable pharmacist of the Cavalry who's studying treatment methods for injuries caused by that monster. You can introduce yourself."

"Ah... Is this...?"

A man who had been staring intently at Yuder with eyes similar to Hellem's extended his hand for a handshake.

"I'm Mick Shuden. I run a trading company, and I've been of great assistance in business dealings with Duke Peletta. I don't particularly like being addressed formally, so please call me Mick."

Yuder slowly shook his hand, feeling a peculiar sensation.

‘Shuden is the surname. ...Mr. Shuden, who runs the trading company?’

When Kishiar had asked where Shuden was upon entering, the situation had passed too quickly for Yuder to think deeply about it. But upon hearing a proper introduction, strange suspicions arose when combined with his previously known profession.

Shuden, and the trading company.

The only place where those two overlapped was known to Yuder.

“...Excuse me, but what is the name of the trading company you run?”

The man, noticing Yuder's probing gaze, smiled knowingly.

“Why, of course, it’s Shuden Trading Company.”

Indeed. Yuder finally confirmed his identity.

Shuden Trading Company, despite its short history, had quickly become one of the famous trading companies on the continent, focusing on the trade of special luxury goods. Yuder had thought it necessary to recognize the connection when Kishiar had casually used the company's badge during a secret visit to meet Revlin at Apeto House.

He never expected to meet someone associated with that company in this manner.

‘I didn’t have time to pay attention to companies like that in my previous life...’

“It seems His Highness didn’t properly explain what I do?”

Mick Shuden cheerfully asked, apparently interpreting Yuder's contemplative expression in his own way.

“...The Commander mentioned that you ran a small trading company, but it seems there was a misunderstanding.”

Kishiar, catching Yuder's gaze, smiled faintly.

“Aha. Our company isn't really that big, so I guess calling it small isn't entirely wrong.”

Mick Shuden looked younger and more unbridled than one would expect for someone running a famous trading company. But the moment he looked around Pethuamet, his eyes completely changed.

“Really intriguing. To continuously eat and digest everything like this means it has good digestive ability, but... its body is small.”

“Its bodily fluids are all poison. It probably dissolves and digests with that, so it doesn't need to be big.”

When Hellem, who was standing nearby, explained, Mick's eyes sparkled, and he turned his head.

“Poison? You've collected some, haven't you, Grandmother?”

“I have, but don't think about stealing it. I won't give it to you. You gather your own.”

“Oh, that's mean. I'm not as skilled as you, Grandma. It's hard for me.”

“I have no intention of helping a merchant.”

As Mick and Hellem exchanged words, Yuder discreetly asked Kishiar a question.

“How did you come to know the one who runs Shuden Trading Company?”

"Well, it's a long story, but... I happened to help quite a bit at the beginning of Shuden Trading Company. We've been maintaining a friendly relationship ever since. Shuden is someone who has a keen interest in items made from monster by-products and has a wealth of related knowledge."



That Kishiar had helped Shuden Trading Company at the beginning was truly unheard of.

'... Such an old friendship, and yet he did not stand up for the Kishiar of his previous life.'

Even after his death, Shuden Trading Company remained silent all along. In fact, not only Shuden but everything associated with Kishiar had been quiet. The Peletta Knights, Nathan Zuckerman, everyone related to Peletta had dispersed quietly and obediently around Kishiar's death.

The Emperor Katchian had no need to even lift a finger, such was the ease of victory, and previously there had been no need to think about what lay behind it. The remaining rebels who sensed defeat and did not diligently display loyalty, but instead fled, were a common occurrence in history. But now, memories that had seemed forgotten were somewhat revived, and things were different.

Would those around Kishiar have abandoned him so easily?

Apart from Nathan Zuckerman, he could see how wholeheartedly all the knights and others around him followed him. And yet, if they dispersed without any resistance, there must have been some reason for it.

Yuder suddenly thought of a hypothesis he had never entertained before, looking at Kishiar's smiling face.

'If all of this was according to Kishiar's own will.'

Before deciding whether it was possible to create a place of defeat for himself, surrounded by many who moved for him, or what the reason could have been if there was one, his head ached with annoyance.

"Hey, assistant. Weren't you going to show me that this monster follows you? I'm sorry I didn't let you do it previously. Can you show me now?"

Before the headache continued, a call broke his thoughts. Yuder slowly got up from his seat towards Mick and Hellem.

"... I'm not sure if it's possible now, but I will at least try."

In fact, there was nothing worth calling an attempt. What Yuder did at that time was just standing near Pethuamet's cage and moving his hand a little.

Yuder stood near the cage, looking down at Pethuamet just like before. Whether due to being tormented by Mick and Hellem's hands for a while, the little monster still had its tail raised, trembling.

Yuder slowly reached his hand toward the cage.

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Sensing the various gazes focusing on his fingertips, he touched the iron bars, and the monster made a small noise.

A moment later, Pethuamet slowly lowered its tail and approached in the direction where Yuder's hand was. The monster's reaction, sniffing at the iron bars as if smelling something, was the same as he had seen before.

Yuder moved his hand to the opposite side. Then, Pethuamet also turned its head and followed his fingertips. Seeing this, Hellem and Mick sighed simultaneously, like a sigh of admiration.

"It's amazing."

"It really responds."

"One who has the ability to read information told me that the monster felt Yuder as an entity like itself."

Kishiar, who had quietly approached behind Yuder, gently pulled him away, so they were a bit farther from the cage. His attitude was so subtle that no one thought it was intrusive.

"What do you two think?"

"Monsters move strictly according to instinct. This following reaction is undoubtedly the response of finding the same kind. Monsters that move in groups have a strong tendency to follow the direction of the one in front," Hellem opened her mouth first. She had certainly done extensive monster research for a long time and was much more knowledgeable than the mages of the Western Mage Union, not being astonished by the surprising phenomenon.

"According to my research, monsters react sensitively in various ways to the same species' bodily fluids. It's not strange that they recognize it as the same species if someone has absorbed toxic fluid," Hellem added that it was fortunate that Pethuamet had the habit of moving in groups. If it had been a monster that showed hostility when meeting the same kind, it might have tried to attack Yuder specifically. Hearing this, Kishiar opened his mouth with a chilly smile.

"Yeah, if that had happened, maybe you wouldn't have come this far."

Following Hellem, Mick also began to share his thoughts.

"I think the same as Grandma. Many believe in the myth that objects made from monster by-products block monster attacks. There are actual cases of people mysteriously avoiding attacks. In that sense, this may be unfamiliar but it seems possible."

Though not often recorded in history, Mick presented a few examples that he knew, which were definitely existing cases.

"I can't guarantee whether this phenomenon will persist after the body heals, but in my opinion... even if you kill this monster right now, it doesn't seem like it would be very detrimental to your Sir Aile's physical condition or remaining injuries. What do you think, Grandma?"

"I think the same."

The conclusion was quickly reached. But even afterward, Mick's deep blue eyes remained fixed on Yuder for a while. It was a gaze that seemed similar to curiosity yet different.

'Something... looks like peering inside.'

Unintentionally meeting that gaze for a moment, Yuder suddenly felt a familiar energy. It was a fleeting sensation, weak enough to be mistaken as an illusion, like the aura that Awakeners emit

when using power, yet Yuder felt it very faintly from Mick before it disappeared. Yuder trusted his senses.

'...Was Mick Shuden an Awakener?'

He had never heard in his previous life that the head of the Shuden family was an Awakener. He wanted to ask, but Mick was quicker to open his mouth toward Kishiar.

"So, Your Highness, now that you have heard our opinions, what will you do?"

Yuder silently looked up at Kishiar's pale cheek, lost in thought. The deeper shadow of his long eyelashes on his cheek seemed to be contemplating whether to kill Pethuamet right away or not. But moments later, the red eyes that were gazing at Pethuamet's cage unexpectedly turned to Yuder.

"Yes. Now that we've concluded there's no remedy, there will be no problem with disposing of it. But... Weren't you assisting because you wanted to find out something more from it?"

Suddenly, the arrow was aimed at him. Yuder was inwardly perplexed but slowly opened his mouth.

"...How did you know?"

"Because it's not in your character to say to dispose of it only after being certain, unless there's something else."

Such quick wits while remaining quiet up until now were truly characteristic of Kishiar. It was a snake-like facet, one he hadn't felt in a while. Enon's eyes, not far away, subtly changed, turning into a look that seemed to desperately want to pry into something, but Yuder avoided that gaze and opened his mouth.

"...Well, yes. I did think that I wanted to find out in more detail how the power of that monster is exerted, but I wanted to tell you that I also oppose disposing of it right away for other reasons."

"What reason is that?"

"Enon has been thinking about it while observing the monster," Yuder said, speaking for Enon.

"That monster has the ability to absorb magic power through toxic fluids, and he speculated that I might be able to utilize the same ability since I've absorbed it."

To go into more detail, the power of the red stone absorbed by Yuder would probably be related, but he decided not to talk about that here.

"If I can find a way to absorb the toxicity that doesn't completely disappear from my body, rather than forcibly removing it, I think it would be good as I can also find out what I want...."

"Does that mean... you intend to activate the remaining toxicity in your body?"

Hellem carefully asked. Then, Enon, who had been stepping back until now, took a step forward and replied.

"The remaining toxicity is small, but I judged it to be in a state where it cannot be forcibly removed even with divine power because it has become excessively adapted to the body. Detoxifying poison means adapting it to the body. Since that guy has recovered a lot of energy and is strong enough to withstand the remaining toxicity with his original power, isn't it worth a try?"

"To do that, you'll have to use the monster's blood; is that what you've thought about and said?"

Enon nodded at Hellem.

"Anyway, the reason that monster was dangerous wasn't the toxicity itself but the strange amplification circle created by the Western mages. If he had been covered with the blood of a monster who hadn't swallowed the amplification, I would have been able to get rid of it before it was absorbed into his body."

But reality hadn't turned out that way. So, Enon suggested discussing this method by taking on a slight risk. Yuder thought the method was quite reasonable, but they needed to hear the opinions of experts, including the mages, to implement it.

"Hmm. This is a solution I haven't thought of at all."

Mick stroked his lips slowly, showing a subtle smile.

"But since it's an unprecedented challenge to remove the toxicity that couldn't be completely eradicated even with magic and has fully attached to the body, perhaps we should try to that extent. Grandmother, what do you think?"

"It could be dangerous."

Hellem answered in a heartbeat.

"Yes, it may be dangerous, but it's not impossible. And the one who knows and can handle that level of danger best is the grandmother. If the assistant must live the rest of his life with one blind eye, I think His Highness will be greatly disappointed. Why not give it a try?"

Hellem did not respond easily. Yuder subtly intervened between them.

"If you don't feel like it, that's fine. I'm grateful enough for you coming here and taking a look."

It was a sincere remark, but Hellem looked at Yuder with an exceedingly pitiful expression. After examining Yuder's left eye, she sighed and eventually nodded her head.

"Alright, I understand. Will you help too?"

"If it's something I can do, I'll certainly help."

Mick answered coolly, squinting his eyes.

"That's why we came here in the first place. Besides, with that pharmacist there, we might finish sooner than expected. He doesn't seem to have an ordinary mind."

"..."

Lines deepened on Enon's brow, but he did not spit out words of refusal to participate.

"So, this is our opinion. Now it's up to His Highness to decide."

Hearing Mick's words, Kishiar's gaze turned towards Yuder. Without words being exchanged, it was clear what he was asking.

Instead of answering, Yuder faintly nodded. Emotions that had briefly flickered in Kishiar's red pupils were quickly gathered and disappeared. Composing his feelings, he returned to his usual decisive countenance, akin to that of Duke Peletta.

"Hellem, if you are to take responsibility for this part, how much time and manpower will be needed?"

"I need no more manpower. More people won't necessarily be better for this job, don't you know? As for preparations, it will be over with just one monster."

And, of course, Yuder, the subject, would also be needed.

"Anyway, I will attempt it, concerned about the bright future of this young man you've brought. If it seems too dangerous, I will withdraw."

"That's why I trust you, Head Mage."

"When did I retire that you still call me that? Wouldn't it be better to call me former Head Mage?"

"Even if you've forsaken your title, your achievements haven't disappeared, have they? If we're to embark on this journey, it's only fair that others know more about who you are."

"...No one can beat you in words, My Lord."

Hellem clicked her tongue, glancing at Yuder and Enon. Still, she seemed to agree with Kishiar's words, introducing herself properly once again.

"I was once called Hellem Caspirl, but since retiring, I've given up both title and surname, and now I'm simply Mage Hellem."

Yuder was secretly very surprised.

'...Not just a court mage, but the former Head Mage?'

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Initially, Yuder had thought that perhaps there was a reason that made it difficult to publicly reveal Hellem's surname, only introducing her first name. However, this situation far exceeded Yuder's expectations. If she were the head of the Imperial Magic Department of the Orr Empire, her skills would be on par with the Elder Archmages at the top of the Pearl Tower.

In an era when most mages found it difficult to cast even a single spell, not everyone was so constrained. Some of the Elders in the Pearl Tower Yuder had met in his previous life knew how to use impressively powerful elemental magic.

Yuder had also considered the possibility that, like Thais Yulman, the expert on monsters, Hellem might have been granted a high position due to her outstanding research ability. However, unlike the several Elders in the Pearl Tower, there was only one position for the head of the Imperial Magic Department. No matter how excellent her research skills might have been, it would not have been enough for her to obtain that position.

The fact that someone who had once held the prestigious title was now living in seclusion in remote Peletta, hiding both her honor and surname and being content with merely being called "grandmother," was hard to believe. However, the calm reactions of Mick Shuden and Nathan Zuckerman made it seem all the more real.

Anyway, it was fortunate that Hellem said that neither much time nor manpower was needed for preparation. Yuder was determined to use this opportunity to find not only the key to recovering his own body but also a solution to the issue related to Kishiar's vessel.

"Since we're on the subject, let's start today. Pharmacist, it seems like you'll have to be with us. Is that okay?"

Enon sighed softly but did not refuse Mick's cheerful words.

"Call me Enon, not 'Pharmacist'."



"Alright, Enon. That's as refreshing as your revolutionary idea for treatment."

Nathan Zuckerman left early to prepare to leave, and Kishiar engaged in conversation with Hellem. As everyone else moved, Yuder's gaze once again met Mick's. In his eyes, there seemed to be a fleeting glimpse of a mirage-like energy.

"... I didn't get to ask earlier, but are you an Awakener?"

"Oh. How did you figure it out so quickly when my power isn't even visible? Indeed, a person with the ability worthy of a hero of the Great Sarain Forest is different in every way."

"I'm naturally a bit sensitive to energy."

Responding calmly, Yuder lowered his voice so that only Mick could hear.

"I don't know what ability you possess, but I'm feeling uneasy as I sense energy every time you look at me."

"Did you feel that? It's not just a little sensitivity. That's impressive."

Mick sincerely admired Yuder and then obediently answered.

"My ability allows me to look inside others. Since it's activated through my eyes, it's not easy to control. If something bothers me, I unintentionally exert my power. Sorry if it was unpleasant."

"...Inside? You mean organs? Or energy?"

"Hahaha. Although I can see energy to some extent, it's neither of those. How should I describe it?"

The man who had been scratching his head looked at Yuder once again with renewed intensity, and this time a mirage visibly flickered around his eyes.

"What I see is, let's say... like the core inside the shell? But your core is quite unique. The most special one I've ever seen among all the people I've met."

What could be so peculiar to be considered the most unique among all the people he had seen so far? Unable to understand, Yuder furrowed his brow slightly, to which Mick quietly said,

"There are many holes inside you. So many empty spaces that they're countless."

A powerful throb resonated somewhere deep within his chest. Surprise and caution raised their heads simultaneously inside Yuder. Suppressing a chilling sensation, Yuder made an effort not to reveal any change in expression and sealed his lips without a word.

"..."

"Well, it doesn't mean it looks dangerous. Since I haven't looked into the hearts of everyone in the world, there might be someone with even stranger contents than you, assistant. Perhaps your power is too strong or it may be an aftereffect of an injury, so don't worry."

After cheerfully spitting out words of comfort or something, Mick patted Yuder's shoulder.

"I want to hear directly from you about the monster you caught in the Great Sarain Forest next time we meet. In fact, that's one of the things I've been looking forward to most?"

"...Understood."

Despite Yuder's curt response, Mick was delighted.

"Great, great. I must prepare some fine wine for that day. I'll treat you in a manner worthy of Shuden's name."

Both Mick and Hellem were unique in many ways. That fact had made Kishiar feel slightly strange in a meeting he never had in his previous life, even among his own people.

Still, it was not a bad feeling.

...

On the way back to the mansion after leaving Enon, Kishiar quietly informed Yuder of the next schedule.

“I will prepare to meet with Baron Willhem and the priests of the Western Sun God Temple as soon as I return. I'm thinking of including Priest Lusan, can you summon him?”

“Understood.”

It was a good thing, as Yuder had to hear about Marty and Robel from Lusan. Upon arrival, Yuder went to find Lusan but stopped in his tracks at the unexpected sight of Robel, who was caring for the memory-lost ones.

‘He was helping out here.’

He hadn't expected Robel's assistance, even though some members who were helping Lusan were absent for other tasks. The two people who noticed Yuder's gaze turned their heads and approached with welcoming expressions.

“Master Yuder, what brings you here?”

“The commander wants to see Priest Lusan. But... what's going on here? Is it a positive outcome?”

Lusan managed an awkward smile, although Yuder's vague expression referred to Robel and Marty's situation.

“Ha-ha... No, it's rather the opposite, so we've decided to seek this gentleman's assistance.”

‘...The opposite?’

Robel, who met Yuder's gaze, made a bitter expression. Lusan explained on his behalf.

“Marty has responded that she doesn't want to see Robel right now. She seems quite confused after hearing Robel's situation, so we decided to give her more time to think.”

“I see.”

“...But thankfully, Master Yuder, or rather, Mr. Yuder, you warned us first. If I had heard without any preparation, really... I wouldn't have known how to respond.”

Robel interjected softly and then looked at the closed door. It was the room where those who had regained their memories were staying.

“I've decided to keep waiting since all I can do is wait. But I couldn't do nothing, so I asked to help the priest, who needed assistance.”

His response was clear, even if weak. The fact that he hadn't given up everything despite Marty's rejection was positive. Lusan seemed to think the same and continued to look at Robel as he spoke.

“Although those who have lost their memories don't recognize Mr. Robel, facing a familiar face seems to help with a quicker recovery, so I accepted. However, I'm being careful not to let him encounter Marty or others who have regained their memories.”

“That should be fine.”

Yuder nodded, expressing his intention to fully respect Lusan's judgment.

“But I won't just keep working. When you go to look for Nahan, please take me with you.”

“Have you had any contact from that side since you came here?”

“No, not at all. I heard that he left his usual lodging and fled, but I have no idea where he might have gone next. I'm sorry I couldn't be of help even though I promised to cooperate.”

Robel's eyes were filled with anger as he spoke. It seemed that capturing Nahan was his only revenge and atonement toward Marty.

“...Then, Robel, as I said earlier, please feed everyone here and then turn the wheelchairs in the direction. Yuder and I will be back shortly.”

Lusan looked at Robel with a touch of regret before instructing the remaining tasks and turning with Yuder. They headed in the direction of the lodging where Kishiar might be, chatting along the way.

“Robel has been very cooperative. He wanted to help more from the first time we spoke. He's apprehensive about the Cavalry, but he doesn't seem hostile.”

“That's fortunate.”

“It's all thanks to you, Yuder.”

Lusan casually praised Yuder, but from Yuder's perspective, Lusan's attitude was even more admirable. Even though things had improved, having the mental strength to act so magnanimously toward an Awakener who was part of the group that had harmed him, like Nahan, was an impossible feat for an ordinary mind.

“Ah, and quite a few letters have been delivered from the Great Sarain Forest and the capital... There might be a letter for you, Yuder, so check it later. I got one too.”

“Is that so? I'll have to check.”

He had previously written a brief reply to the letter sent by his colleagues left in the Great Sarain Forest. It was about time for a response to start trickling back in.

In the lodging to which Yuder and Lusan returned, besides Kishiar and Nahan Zuckerman, there was one more guest. The guest stood up and smiled warmly at Yuder as soon as he saw him.

“It's been a while.”

It was none other than the head of the Western Mage Union, Micalin Punt.

## Chapter 379

"It's a relief to see you looking much healthier than the last time I saw you. I'm truly glad."

Micalin, whom Yuder met again in Tainu, looked much cleaner and neater than when he stayed in Great Sarain Forest. He repeatedly expressed his relief at seeing Yuder.

"It's fortunate to see you looking well too, Leader. How did you get here?"

"He was invited for what's happening today."

The answer came from Kishiar, who was sitting behind Micalin.

"Despite agreeing to verify the divine sword in a private setting, Baron Willhem kept making excuses and wanting to increase the attendees, so I suggested calling the Western Mage Union, who have been instrumental in maintaining security in the West."

It was clear what the Baron was after. He wanted to escalate matters, hoping to increase his influence if Kishiar was proven to be lying, all the while refusing to give up his base ambitions despite bowing his head for the Star of Nagran. It was remarkable.

Kishiar had no reason to back down, as the sword he possessed was the real divine sword, and he was its true master. However, he subtly provoked the Baron's pride and drew in the Western Mage Union and Micalin.

The Baron had thought that the Western Mage Union would not accept the request, but surprisingly, Micalin accepted it at once upon seeing the letter.

"I didn't want to go to Baron Willhem's mansion, but if I can help His Highness, the rewards will more than justify it."

"That's enough."

"Thank you for saying so. The help we can offer is simply maintaining neutrality and judging the matter fairly on site... I promise to proclaim the truth we witness today, without a shred of falsehood, to everyone in the West with full honor."

Seeing the confident smile of the elder mage, Yuder realized that Kishiar's reason for drawing the Western Mage Union was not merely due to old grudges between them and Baron Willhem.

'The influence of the Mage Union in the West seems greater than I thought.'

And that made sense. Having handled dangerous tasks like controlling monsters in the West for Baron Willhem for several years, they must have had rapport with many people.

'They must be pleased to not only repay our past kindness but also take revenge against Baron Willhem, who had dared to trample the mage's pride.'

The comprehensive research support that the Western Mage Union was to receive from Kishiar must have also positively influenced this refreshing decision.

Micalin's attitude, clearly different from before just by his immediate visit to see Kishiar upon arrival, was noticed. Recalling his unpleasant expression in Great Sarain Forest, Yuder thought he seemed quite pleased today and allowed himself a faintly cold smile.

Baron Willhem might think that just the Western Mage Union alone wouldn't be able to do anything. But that would be something he would learn when it actually happened.

While Yuder was lost in thought, Kishiar's gaze shifted to Lusan beside him.

"Priest Lusan. The priests visiting today are coming to verify the authenticity of my Divine Sword Orr and whether I am its real master or not. Do you know that?"

"Ah, yes. I heard."

Lusan nodded with a slightly tense face.

"I trust the priests Baron Willhem will bring, of course, but your divine power is needed to provide more concrete evidence. The more powerful the priest, the more helpful it will be, but no matter how I think about it, there doesn't seem to be anyone better than you."

The explicit compliment made Lusan's ears turn red. He tightly gripped the wooden emblem around his neck and nodded.

"If there's anything I can help with, I'll do it!"

"Thank you. In that case... Nathan."

"Yes."

Nathan Zuckerman, the last to catch the lord's eye, stepped forward.

"Please inform the Tain First Prince that I may be a little late for dinner tonight, and ask for his understanding."

"Understood."

Nathan Zuckerman casually said goodbye and went outside. That conversation was a kind of signal. Yuder recalled the command that Kishiar had given to Pruelle van Tain during the previous meeting.

When Kishiar met privately with the priests of the Sun God and Baron Willhem, he would transform into the Baron to meet his brother Graham Willhem and gather information.

Sending Nathan Zuckerman was to notify Pruelle of the start time and protect him at the same time.

Kishiar got up leisurely, like a predator anticipating the long-awaited hunt. The divine sword hanging at his waist was still wrapped in thick cloth. Yuder began to walk behind him.

Today's meeting was strictly private, so even the servants in the mansion didn't know what was happening. Kishiar headed towards a small chapel located behind the main house, following a path where Baron Willhem had previously sent the servants away.

Already there, three elderly priests dressed in priestly garments and Baron Willhem were waiting for them.

"I greet Your Grace, Duke Peletta."

"The eternal light of radiance, may warm righteousness always be with you."



The three priests were renowned figures leading the Sun God's temple in the western region. Born and raised nobly, their necks and hands were adorned with precious gems and gold and silver emblems like jewelry.

After introducing themselves and finishing the greetings, their eyes moved unanimously to the sword at Kishiar's waist. A sense of tension filled the air, and Baron Willhem stepped forward.

"Your Highness, is that sword the Divine Sword Orr?"

"It is."

At Kishiar's stoic answer, the elderly priests all inhaled sharply.

"But why have you covered it with cloth?"

"The scabbard is too flashy, and it hurts my eyes a little. Well, I suppose I should uncover it to verify?"

Kishiar nonchalantly untied the cloth that bound the scabbard, under the gaze of everyone present. Slowly revealed, the large and small magical stones and the beautiful patterns created with powdered gems began to appear on the scabbard.

"Oh... My God."

As if witnessing something deeply awe-inspiring, one of the priests exclaimed excessively. Another priest looked closely at the sword, with eyes that still couldn't entirely erase doubt.

'It probably looks suspicious, appearing to be a mere ornamental sword.'

The divine sword had been left neglected in a corner of Peletta Castle for quite some time without meeting its owner, Kishiar. It was famous as the sword of the First Emperor, but even the priests wouldn't have known much about it unless they had had an exceptional interest in the sword.

Still, thanks to the tales that unauthorized touch could bring misfortune, no one dared to reach out to it. Kishiar, noticing Baron Willhem's doubtful look, smiled and slowly grabbed the handle of the sword.

"I don't seem to enjoy drawing it for no reason, but today is the day, so even the Divine Sword Orr will understand."

The well-maintained blade slowly emerged from the scabbard. The priests and Baron Willhem all stared with narrowed eyes and tense expressions, but no other change occurred.

"..."

One of the priests who had maintained silence cautiously opened his mouth.

"It appears... quite impressive."

"Naturally. I sharpened it well this morning."

Kishiar replied playfully, twisting the sword this way and that to show it off.

"Can you feel it? The power of the divine sword."

The priests looked at each other with somewhat bewildered expressions. They seemed to have expected the power or mark of the divine sword to reveal itself merely by looking at it, but their faces betrayed their perplexity when this did not happen. After a moment, one of the priests stepped forward and spoke.

"I must apologize, Your Highness. By sight alone, we cannot feel the divine power, and verification seems difficult. Could you perhaps show us that mighty and divine force that was felt even outside the Great Sarain Forest?"

"Hmm... Actually, that might be a bit difficult. Whether it was due to using the sword's power excessively in that dangerous situation or something else, regrettably, I have not fully recovered yet. You know I'm famous for being frail, don't you?"

Their eyes all turned in unison to the face of the man, smiling, a head taller and broader in shoulders. However, the fact that the Duke of Peletta had been sickly and bedridden for a long time was known to everyone, so no one said a word.

“So I want to prove it in another way.”

“What would that be?”

“Could one of you infuse this sword with divine power?”

“What?”

“A sword bestowed by God can manifest its aura more powerfully than other swords, and it responds to the power of God. To infuse it with divine power, there's no need to actually touch the sword. If you provide enough force, confirmation should be possible.”

“Ah...”

The faces of the three elderly priests changed simultaneously into various colors.

## Chapter 380

Yuder thought he understood the reason why the priests hesitated, looking at each other with faces filled with uncertainty.

'I'm reminded of Bertrail Shand Apeto.'

Though his divine power was not of a significant level, he was a man who had risen to the position of one of the twelve Elder Priests solely because he came from one of the four great ducal families. Although he had long since passed away, there were still many like him within the temple.

But just because such occurrences were common did not mean they were not shameful.

The reason Kishiar had mentioned Lusan's divine power and had him attend this gathering was all for this very moment.

"Then... I'll go first."

After some time of exchanging hesitant glances about who should go first, one of the priests stepped forward, his face displaying discomfort. Perhaps worried that even the hem of his garment might touch the divine sword, he stretched his hand from as far away as possible.

As he began to mumble a prayer, white divine power started to flow. The faintness of it was laughable, not even coming close to the level of divine power Lusan usually exhibited, and only half as strong as what Kishiar could produce. What's more, because he sent his power from a distance, the light that actually reached the sword was negligible.

"Wouldn't it be better to come a bit closer?" Kishiar kindly suggested, looking at the sword that had not changed at all. But the light emitted by the priest abruptly stopped at that moment.

"Oh dear."

"...I apologize."

The priest tried a few more times to gather his strength but no more light came forth. He withdrew dejectedly, and the second priest stepped forward. Although he bravely approached the divine sword, unfortunately, the amount of divine power he could produce was much less than the first priest's. Even after struggling and squeezing out his divine power, the divine sword showed no reaction.

The third priest was a man who had been standing near Baron Willhem, continuously eyeing Kishiar with suspicion.

"I regret to say that I'll need a little preparation before I begin."

It wasn't a question of whether it was okay to prepare; it was merely a polite announcement.

The third priest then drank two bottles of a special holy water made for the priests, excusing that his health had deteriorated due to being busy with temple affairs recently, and that gathering strength seemed to be difficult.

"Huueeugh...!"

However, despite the effect of the holy water, the divine power he produced was the weakest of the three.

'A candle on the verge of going out would be brighter than that.'

The other two priests hastily averted their eyes, as if finding it difficult to watch his earnest and strained efforts. Embarrassed, flushed necks were visible in between their pained sounds. Baron Willhem bit his lip, and Micalin, who had been quietly observing, couldn't help but cough to hide his laughter.

"Priest Futo, perhaps that's enough for now."

Micalin, who had barely suppressed his laughter, spoke with difficulty, causing the third priest to bow his head.

"I can still do more. It's just that the speed at which the divine power is coming out is much slower than usual."

"I understand how hard it is to exert strength in an unhealthy state, even as a mage. Speaking as someone who admires Priest Futo's excellent sermons, please don't take my concerns the wrong way."

Micalin soothed the other party with remarkable skill. Only after being cajoled several times did the third priest finally, yet reluctantly, withdraw his hand.

"I am still fine, but since the Head Mage is so worried, I suppose I have no choice."

Though he tried desperately to appear composed, he couldn't hide the sweat that burst forth from his face, nor his trembling hands. As he was about to withdraw his hand, Baron Willhem twisted his lips into a smirk and raised his voice.

"Ah, how can this be? Despite accepting the divine power of three excellent priests, there's no change in the divine sword... I don't know what to think."

"I'm just as surprised," Kishiar said, calmly nodding in agreement.

As Kishiar played along, Baron Willhem twitched his lips momentarily before opening them with a feigned worried expression.

"Your Highness, have you ever previously confirmed the information that the divine sword reacts to divine power?"

"Do you wish to say that I lied?"

"Far from it, Your Majesty. I'm just concerned that if the information you have isn't something you've confirmed yourself, but rather something known through old records, there might be a possibility that the records were mistaken."

Although his explanation was long, in short, he meant that the three priests' divine power wasn't the problem; the suspicion lay with the divine sword.

"How fortunate we are to be the only ones here. If others knew about this, imagine how surprised and worried they would be..."

Despite the Baron's skill in steering the conversation in a direction unfavorable to Kishiar, Kishiar merely smiled.

"Indeed. It's a valid concern. I've always been deeply impressed by the Baron's loyalty."

"Not at all. In this situation, anyone would..."

"But don't worry. There are three priests here, are there not?"

"Yes?"

"High Priest Lusan. Come here."

Baron Willhem knew that the only priest in the Cavalry was also scheduled to attend with Kishiar today. And he had long since heard through his servants that the priest was an utterly ordinary young initiate. He didn't give it much thought.

But for some reason, the wooden holy symbol around the young priest's neck, his thick green hair carelessly tied back, made Baron Willhem suspicious and uneasy.

"Would you be able to prove it by pouring divine power over this sword?"

"Of course."

Lusan approached the sword without hesitation. Without reciting a prayer or drinking holy water, he simply raised his hand.

And a moment later, a bright white light poured out from his hand like a waterfall, literally covering the blade of the divine sword.

"..."

The three elder priests couldn't hide their shock. Even Baron Willhem closed his mouth. After pouring out the light for a long time, Lusan pulled back his divine power with an unlabored face, and as if it had been waiting, a new light gently rose above the silver blade. Moments later, it shimmered, lifting beautiful characters like a sentence above the blade.

"That's from the scripture...!"

Someone among the elder priests muttered unconsciously. Someone else staggered back. In front of the pure and powerful divine power that no one could doubt, Yuder too felt an overwhelming sensation.

This was the first time he had felt such a dense and unique divine power. It was completely different from the divine power that the priests emitted for healing, yet even more astonishing was the fact that he could feel that it was essentially the same. Lusan also looked surprised, but he soon knelt down, joined his hands, and assumed a praying position.

A long time passed, but the light did not easily show signs of dimming. Kishiar clicked his tongue as he pushed the sword back into its scabbard. For some reason, the sword seemed to resist going in, emitting an even stronger light, but when its master shoved it in without hesitation, all its energy instantly ceased as if it had never existed. Only then did the sound of relieved breaths come from the direction of the elder priests.

Kishiar, looking down at it indifferently, sheathed the sword at his waist and spoke.

“Do you believe now?”

No one dared to open their mouths.

Baron Willhem, and the three elder priests, simply maintained their stunned expressions.

“I won't expressly forbid mentioning what was seen today. If there is someone who worries excessively again, let them remember that it is tantamount to doubting the God. Please convey that to them.”

His red eyes swept over Baron Willhem's parched face, warningly.

“Baron Willhem, I can trust and ask this of you, can't I?”

The look was intensely affectionate, yet at the same time, chillingly cold. Baron Willhem, feeling a strange chill running down his back, finally managed to open his dry mouth.

“...Yes, Your Highness.”

“I too will never forget the honor of witnessing this holy miracle and will pass it on.”

Micalin followed with a respectful salute, placing his hand over his chest. Yuder saw for the first time since meeting Micalin Punt, a look of pure happiness on his face.

“And you?”



The elder priests, receiving Kishiar's gaze, also bowed their heads. The priest who seemed friendly with Baron Willhem answered with a voice as small as a mosquito's, appearing to want to maintain his pride, but the other two showed a demeanor incomparably more subdued than before.

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Baron Willhem's defeat was as clear as day, beyond doubt to anyone who saw. Yuder looked at the magnificent figure of the man, proudly standing even with the splendid sheath of the divine sword revealed, and unexpectedly felt his heart pound.

The new master chosen by the Divine Sword Orr.

This time, that sword would not lose its master.