

Turning 381

Chapter 381

"Today, what I witnessed was truly a miracle. My heart still has not settled. To see with my own eyes the divine power of the divine sword... I thought I was witnessing a page from the founding legends."

"How embarrassing."

On the way out, after leaving behind Baron Willhem and the priests, Micalin endlessly showered Kishiar with praise he had been holding back. Seeing Kishiar's face show no sign of embarrassment, Micalin, with an excited face, turned his flood of compliments towards Lusan, who was following them.

"That's right. The young priest's divine power was also truly remarkable. To have such potent divine power at such a young age... The Temple has surely missed a great talent. Heh heh."

"What? I haven't really done anything..."

Lusan, taken aback as the conversation suddenly turned towards him, didn't know what to do with himself, prompting the elder mage to shake his head.

"What are you talking about? Do you know that after our union's mages saw you, they have been rushing to the Temple to offer worship? Everyone will be very pleased to know what happened today."

"If it weren't for Priest Lusan's exceptional abilities, proving the power of the divine sword would have been very difficult. Anyone would know that, so don't be too modest."

"Ah, thank you."

When Kishiar also joined in, Lusan's ears turned red.

"I don't think I should hear such grand praise, since my divine power only increased after what happened in Great Sarain Forest... but I'm glad I could help both of you."

It was a bit surprising to learn that Lusan's divine power had increased after the events in Great Sarain Forest, but on the other hand, it also made sense.

'After using his divine power extensively and honing it in Great Sarain Forest, it would naturally grow.'

Lusan's reputation would probably join that of the Cavalry in the gossip mill, and it was a sure bet.

With a face freshened as years of frustration were relieved, Micalin turned to Kishiar, who casually asked a question as they walked by.

"By the way... do you know anything about Baron Willhem's charity party that supposedly took place last year?"

Micalin tilted his head at the sudden question.

"The party that the Baron occasionally throws to wring out money? After being fooled in the first year we established our headquarters in Tainu, I haven't attended again, so I don't really know. But why are you curious about that?"

A party to wring out money. Considering the information about the party he had heard from Pruelle, there could be no more accurate expression.

"It's supposed to happen again soon, so I was just wondering."

"At such a chaotic time? I've long known he had neither thought nor conscience, but he always surpasses expectations. The unprecedented situation of closing the city gates has barely passed, and now this!"

Micalin harshly criticized Baron Willhem. He spat out words filled with resentment like a machine gun, then belatedly collected himself and examined Kishiar's complexion.

"Ah, if Your Highness wishes me to attend, I will try to do so, but..."

"That's fine. More importantly, the cooperation on security with the Western Mage Union and the matters concerning Great Sarain Forest are far more vital. Make sure to handle those things when you get back."

"Yes, of course. Don't worry about either matter."

The elder mage gladly responded. After he left and Lusan went on his way to take care of those who had lost their memories, Yuder finally opened his mouth, which had been shut all this time, to ask a question.

"You've decided to cooperate with the Western Mage Union on security?"

"Yes. We discussed it when he came to see me earlier. Fortunately, he seemed very cooperative."

Maintaining the peace of Tainu, calming the confusion of the people, and searching for the Star of Nagran required not only the cooperation of the few mages and the Peletta Knights but also many others. If the Western Mage Union decided to follow Kishiar and the Cavalry, things would have been much easier.

"Thank goodness."

"Yes. It was good that they arrived just in time. Speaking of which, I wonder if Nathan conveyed the message properly to Pruelle..."

Kishiar's gaze shifted to the mansion not far away. Somewhere deep within, Graham Willhem was likely to be dwelling.

A fleeting sharpness, like that of a beast eyeing its prey, passed over his red eyes and then vanished. With an unbreakable determination, one that one could hardly attribute to the person who had just demonstrated the power of the divine sword, he was immediately calculating the next task and the tasks that would follow.

"...I'm looking forward to dinner tonight."

"So am I. Indeed, there's no one who understands me as well as my assistant."

The two exchanged a similar smile.

"I was able to hear quite a few things from Graham."

That evening, when Pruelle appeared at dinner with Nathan Zuckerman, he reported the success of their plan as soon as he sat down.

"It was a bit of a struggle at first since he was out of his mind from the drugs, but I believe the information is reliable."

"He must have been terrified by the memories of that day. Well, it's understandable."

Kishiar replied, cutting his meat.

"Yes. Luckily, he seems to have forgotten that I asked him anything. Even if he talks to the real Baron Willhem later, it seems there's no risk of today's events being exposed."

"So, what did he know?"

"According to Graham, the most important 'items' are divided and placed in a secret building connected to the basement of the consortium building and another location. He managed the items in the consortium building, and it seems that Baron Willhem managed the others."

'Just as I thought.'

The unsettling behavior of Graham, who seemed to have hidden something in the basement of the consortium building he claimed was empty, and the soldiers who unusually patrolled the nearby entertainment district often. He had predicted it to some extent, but the connection was finally clearly revealed.

"Did you ask what items are there?"

"Yes. He said that the area near the top has drugs and valuables, and the other side has 'horses.'"

"We must search the area and secure them first. But did he not even give a hint as to the other location?"

"I couldn't confirm the location precisely as he was so incoherent. However..."

Pruelle's voice trailed off as he looked thoughtfully at the food on his plate.

"He kept repeating that the place is so secure that nobody but a person of his bloodline could open it."

"That's quite a significant statement. It's not a metaphor; we'll have to think about where it might be."

At that moment, Yuder thought that perhaps he knew the answer. It was thanks to the words from Enon that had crossed his mind earlier.

"...Commander. I apologize for being sudden, but I have something to say about what I discovered on the third floor of the prison."

"Hmm?"

Kishiar turned his head.

"What do you have to say?"

"In the olden times where the Duke of Tain resided, I have heard that there was a magic device that could only be opened by the power of blood lineage. Hearing Prince Pruelle's words, it seems we may need to consider the possibility that the crest of the House of Tain we saw there could be some magic locking device."

"A magic device that can only be opened with the power of blood lineage?"

Pruelle's eyes widened a bit as he questioned. It seemed he was unaware that such a thing existed. Kishiar also stopped cutting his meat and fell into thought, but soon opened his mouth as if he understood what Yuder was talking about.

"...Protection of blood, huh? Hmm. Certainly, since the building was made during that era, and if the owner was a mage, there is a possibility that such a device was made to hide the fourth floor."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, but could you tell me what the protection of blood is? I'm ashamed to say I don't know much about magic, so I can't guess."

"It's a device that mages used about a thousand years ago as one of the methods to thoroughly protect secrets. They made it so that only the mage and those connected by his bloodline could enter where the hidden secret was."

Kishiar, who gave an almost identical explanation, added,

"If it were the old days when magic energy filled the world abundantly, it might be known, but it has not been used for a long time now due to various problems. It's natural not to know. There's no need to blame yourself."

"Is that so?"

Pruelle, nodding his head, looked back at Yuder with a newly surprised face.

"How did Sir Aile know about such a device? That's really remarkable."

"...If the fourth floor exists, I was curious how it could have been hidden, and I happened to learn about this method while gathering information. If Prince Pruella hadn't told me that the first Duke of Tain was a mage, it would have been hard to find out."

The one who had informed him of this method was Enon, but since he couldn't reveal Enon's identity, he had no choice but to fumble through the explanation.

"That's still impressive."

Yuder felt Kishiar's gaze on his face as well as Pruelle, who purely admired him. He avoided Kishiar's penetrating, soundless red eyes and moved his hand toward the food plate.

Chapter 382

Maintaining the usual impassive expression was extraordinarily difficult in front of Kishiar. It wasn't because Kishiar was perceptive. It was because it was becoming more and more awkward for Yuder to hide the truth in front of that man as the days went by.

The most unbearable enemies are always found within, not without. Yuder found the act of avoiding Kishiar's gaze more uncomfortable than anything else, and Yuder knew the reason too.

From the moment he began to harbor genuine emotions for that man, something had started to grow, irritating like a grain of sand that had entered the shoe incorrectly. At first, it was just a little annoying, but now it suffocated ceaselessly like water rising up to the neck.

It was emotion.

The attraction forcibly suppressed.

Regret that Yuder didn't even know the name of until recently.

The weight of all those things weighed down on Yuder, making even this small lie difficult to conceal. The past, when Yuder lived directly without disagreement between the head and the heart, felt like a distant memory.

"...Your Highness. If the 'Protection of Blood' is really in the underground dungeon, wouldn't it be better if I go and help confirm it?"

At Pruelle's voice, Kishiar's gaze that had been lingering on Yuder's face disappeared. Yuder then realized that the moment that had felt eternally long was actually just the blink of an eye.

"That would be good. But there seems to be no need to do it right away."

As if he had never looked at Yuder's face, Kishiar skillfully continued the conversation with Pruelle.

"Understood. Call me whenever you need me."

"How is the list of attendees for the party coming along?"

"It is gathering faster than expected, so I will be able to compile and deliver it soon."

As the topic shifted to the list of party attendees, Pruelle enthusiastically shared the stories he had heard from his informants. Among various rumors, what Pruelle particularly emphasized was the gossip that many southern merchants were present in Tainu.

"Upon checking, it turns out to be true. There were still quite a few who remembered a noticeable group of foreign merchants. They likely came here to help move goods and have a deep connection with my father."

"Hmm. I've thought so before, but it seems that their work with Tain is really tied with enormous trust."

"Since they have gained a lot from my father, they certainly wouldn't want to lose that relationship."

"True. Money and interests can be the most certain motive and connection. But... it's still bothering me."

"What part is bothering you?"

"Their purpose, shall I say?"

Pruelle slowly blinked at the unexpected comment, unable to guess Kishiar's meaning.

Kishiar didn't mind the lack of response. With a thoughtful face, he maintained silence before opening his mouth again.

"Prince Pruelle."

"Yes."

"Is there a possibility that those southern merchants will come here again this time?"

'Is Kishiar thinking that the southern merchants will come to Tainu again this time?'

Sending noticeable foreign merchants to this place, where the Cavalry and the Star of Nagran shine, would not be a good choice, even if they had done well last year. Yuder would have made a different choice if he were the Tain Duke, but if blinded by greed and impatience, it was an uncertain matter.

"That... I'm not sure either, but I'll find out as soon as I return to the capital."

"Start investigating now, if possible. Contact those in the capital for information, and I'd like you to find out more about those southern merchants from your side."

Pruelle's expression turned thoughtful. Instead of wasting time asking unnecessary questions, he immediately replied that he would do so.

"I understand. I will inform you as soon as I hear anything."

"Thank you."

After the meal, Pruelle cautiously asked if Kishiar's demonstration of the divine sword had gone well while he met with Graham. Although he must have seen the radiant appearance of the divine sword hanging at Kishiar's waist when he came in, he seemed to want to hear the story directly.

Kishiar gladly recounted what happened before Baron Willhem and the priests. Pruelle, unable to hide his regret for not having witnessed the spectacle himself, smiled.

"In fact... when I first heard through the Emperor's announcement that Your Highness was the owner of the divine sword, I could not wholly believe it. But now it's different. Thinking about it, leaving the capital at that time must have been part of a grand plan."

"Really, you think so?"

“Don't you think?”

The questioning voice was that of someone who already knew the answer. Pruelle stood up, looking in awe at Kishiar, who was smiling instead of replying. Before leaving, he left a meaningful remark.

“Now, I will not dare to try to understand the end of how far Your Highness and His Majesty the Emperor are looking.”

The door closed, and the once gentle atmosphere slowly dissipated. Yuder felt the gaze upon him once again. It was a look similar to before.

What to say?

Waiting for the other to speak in the silence was a somewhat anxious affair. Until now, he had never reacted greatly to Yuder's suspicious side and had rather been interested in it.

As much as Yuder found it difficult to endure even a small lie, Kishiar might feel the same. If Yuder had changed, so could him. And if the day came when Kishiar would lay down the patience they had maintained and wanted to hear about the doubts... Yuder was not very confident about how calmly he would be able to judge.

As Yuder was thinking this, finally, the awaited call rang in his ears.

“Yuder.”

“Yes.”

“You look tired; wouldn't it be good to rest early today?”

“...Yes?”

At a question that reflexively made them lift their head, very different from what he had expected, Yuder looked straight into the face that was leaning askew, chin on the table. The unshaken eyes, transparently revealing their emotions, were looking only at Yuder's face. It was a calm look, as if it had already foreseen even the bewilderment that Yuder was feeling now.

At that moment, the uncomfortable anxiety that had been nagging at Yuder's nerves lost its way. Yuder momentarily lost his words and stared blankly into those eyes before finally regaining his senses.

"I am fine."

"The assistant always says that he is fine, but to me, you never looked fine. You must be tired from moving around since early morning, so listen to me."

"No, I am..."

He tried to say he was really fine, but it was useless. A hand that had approached in the blink of an eye touched his forehead, and the words stopped as soon as their lips started to move.

"See, you have a fever. I thought you ate a little less than usual, too."

"..."

It was... entirely because of Kishiar's gaze. Yuder slowly closed and opened his eyes, aware of the cool warmth of the large hand that covered about half of his field of vision.

A temperature that was cool yet uniquely warm.

The body fragrance emanating from within.

Due to the contact of skin against skin, the dark fog that had been crouching in his chest was suddenly unleashed, and words that should have only been in his chest suddenly sprang from his lips.

"... Aren't you going to ask anything?"

The moment he spoke, a brief regret passed by. It was as if he had confessed to being stung.

"What do you mean?"

"..."

"Is it because I didn't ask you what you were talking about with Mick earlier?"

Of course, it wasn't a question asked out of genuine ignorance. Kishiar knew what Yuder was talking about, but he had decided not to ask anything.

It was as it had been when he said that the key to changing their relationship was in Yuder's hands.

Until Yuder opened his mouth first, Kishiar would never snatch that key or pretend to see it. If Yuder did not approach first, he would never intrude first - a fact that still applied in this situation, clearly realized through those words.

Suddenly, a day when Yuder had his first meal in front of Kishiar came to mind. Yuder had been cautious then, not even touching most of the prepared food, but he had lied emotionlessly when asked if it was delicious.

And then Kishiar had repeatedly asked the same question until Yuder gave an honest answer. The man, who wanted someone who could honestly tell what he felt rather than saying something tasted good when it did not, was still repeating the same thing with the same persistence, albeit in a slightly different way.

He would willingly endure until the wall crumbled and revealed its interior, as he had done so several times already, breaking down Yuder.

Yuder inhaled and exhaled deeply without opening his mouth. Ridiculous as it may seem, at the same time as confirming his opponent's unchanging solidity, his anxiety disappeared, and his mind cleared.

He relaxed his tightly tensed shoulders and opened his mouth with a sigh-like expression.

"Mick and I... we only briefly discussed abilities. Come to think of it, why didn't you tell me beforehand that he was an Awakener?"

"He doesn't like to openly admit that he's an Awakener. But it seems he couldn't deceive the assistant's eyes, could he?"

"I couldn't possibly not notice, as he kept observing me with that ability."

"Really? What did he say?"

Yuder hesitated for a moment.

"He said... there are many holes in my core."

"Holes?"

Kishiar faltered for a moment. He seemed to be trying to understand what he had heard, furrowing his brows, but as his eyes met Yuder's, they slowly unfolded again. His expression was as bright and beautiful as ever, with a smile that was no different from before. But beneath it was a layer of caution that was incomparable to the past. He asked, slowly but gently enough that Yuder wouldn't feel threatened.

"I can't quite... guess what he means. Did Mick tell you what it means?"

"It didn't seem like a metaphor. He said it doesn't look dangerous, so there's no need to worry, perhaps..."

Yuder hesitated because the memory of the numerous gaps and the pain of realizing them had come to mind.

That pain was most akin to coldness. Although he knew it wasn't actually cold, when he thought about the holes somewhere in his chest, it felt as though all warmth was disappearing around him.

It's very strange not to know what was once there but is now gone. He only forgot about it because he tried not to think too deeply about it.

Yuder could not fully guess what would have been in those holes inside him. Whether it was a memory, emotion, why it had disappeared, or what would happen if he could fill it all.

But he thought it was okay. There were many more important things in the world.

Yet, despite his assurance that it was alright, Kishiar's observant gaze did not change a bit. He kept his silence for a long time, studying Yuder's expressionless white face with a cautious and persistent eye.

The familiar yet unfamiliar sense that overcame Yuder when he realized that he was being observed, even though he was hiding something, made him feel strange.

'Ah.'

The absolute barrier that had protected his defenseless self, not being able to see after capturing the giant Pethuamet. And the gaze that he could feel but not see when he was within it. That sensation, which he hadn't felt since he started seeing again, was now returning.

When holding the invisible him in his arms and feeding him, applying medicine and rebandaging, when secretly climbing a tree as if no one was in the world. Had Kishiar been watching him like this all those times?

With eyes that were so blindly trusting and yet so tender it hurt.

His heart throbbed violently. It was a sensation akin to pain, but it wasn't cold.

"Why are you looking at me... like that?"

"No. It's nothing. I was just thinking that I need to ask Mick a little more about it."

When Yuder asked with a slightly suppressed voice, the emotion Kishiar had shown was quickly hidden as if it had never been there. Yuder stared at the familiar eyes that expertly rearranged emotions, then impulsively opened his mouth again.

"Commander. But if I were to say that I wasn't surprised, since I already knew about it... would you believe me?"

It was a rather incoherent statement, even in his own mind. Even though Kishiar was generous towards him, he thought Kishiar might take it as a joke. But Kishiar didn't laugh. He simply glanced at Yuder and asked curtly.

"Is that so? How?"

"Just... It's my body, so I naturally came to know."

"Has it been that way from the beginning?"

He was silent at those words, then shook his head.

"And yet you say it's not dangerous?"

"It's not a life-threatening injury... I don't feel like I'm in a critically dangerous state, just like Mick said."

Kishiar was silent for a long time. After quite a while, he quietly opened his mouth.

"Have you heard exactly what Mick Shuden's ability is?"

"He only said it's an ability to see the essence inside the shell."

"He sees the essence embedded in the subject's flesh. It's usually something one might call a soul. He was the one who confirmed for me that my vessel has healed since the day of awakening."

Although anything alive could be said to have a soul, Mick could see the essence even in non-living things. Kishiar muttered that it might be seen as a suitable ability for a merchant, picking out good items for trade, but there was no amusement on his face.

"Even if your soul wasn't originally in such a state, now that it has so many holes, it doesn't seem good even if it doesn't threaten your life. But I must be thankful that I heard it directly from you now, thanks to meeting Mick Shuden."

"..."

"I'll look into the matter myself. Will that be okay?"

Yuder didn't know exactly what Kishiar meant by looking into the holes in his soul, but he slowly nodded his head. A faint smile finally appeared at the corners of Kishiar's mouth.

"If there's anything else you want to say, I'm ready to listen at any time, so speak comfortably without doubting the listener's trust. About that hole, or anything else, it's all fine."

"...Yes."

To talk about the holes within him, he would inevitably have to mention the lost memories and emotions. That was still Yuder's deepest secret that he couldn't utter.

But the moment Kishiar's whisper reached his ear, Yuder unknowingly felt an urge to say something. Not even knowing what he wanted to say, his throat, lips, and tongue were incredibly dry and tingling. That urge, barely suppressed, reminded him of the time when he was blind and longed for and wanted to reach out to Kishiar.

He unwittingly parted his lips slightly and then closed them again. Instead of revealing his secret, he thought he would like to touch the smooth and pale cheek and eyelashes in front of him, just like when he had taken advantage of his blindness to touch the man.

It was truly ridiculous, but his mind was filled with that thought, and he couldn't think of anything else for a moment.

And in that moment, as if reading Yuder's will, Kishiar twitched one eyebrow.

"When you stare so ardently... I somehow want to interpret your intention as I please."

Yuder was silent. Simultaneously, Kishiar's eyes changed as well. The air took on a different color in an instant.

"I feel like rewarding my assistant for speaking honestly, so I'm thinking of coming over to you now. If you don't like it, stand up and go call the servants to clear the table."

That sentence reminded Yuder of a conversation once held in front of the Commander's office door.

Yuder cautiously looked down at the approaching white hand, filled with a force that could not be denied.

Naturally, Yuder did not stand up this time either.

The approaching man grabbed both sides of the back of Yuder's seated chair and lowered himself. As the man's smooth face approached, as if to look into each other's eyes, Yuder's awe and repressed longing flared up surprisingly strongly.

Unable to bear the blatant expression reflected in Kishiar's eyes, Yuder closed his eyes, and a deep kiss began, as if it had been waiting. Through the mingling lips, more explicit and sensual than before, Yuder felt a satisfaction greater than what had been desired. When coming to senses, Yuder's arms had somehow ended up around Kishiar's neck. As Yuder tried to lower them, a white hand reached out, holding the clasped arms, preventing them from being released, and delving a little deeper.

It was still as sensually tingling as the back of the head and as addictive as one could not escape. However, the shock that was there at first was gone now. In its place was a sense of union that felt momentarily familiar and had become more concentrated and profound beneath a seemingly calmed surface.

Drinking in the breath that flowed between the lips, Yuder felt the heat that resonated dully within.

'... Maybe Enon was right.'

The desire that incessantly nudged might be considered abnormal, but it might not be.

How did others endure such intense hunger and unfulfilled desires? The notion of living with this constant longing to bind with someone deeper and longer was so provocative. An overwhelming number of emotions for one person filled the mind so much that no other thoughts could form, and yet the desire to escape from them seemed strange.

He wondered if Kishiar La Orr was thinking the same thing.

During such disorganized thoughts, a faint sound of knocking from somewhere reached his ears. Suddenly coming to his senses and opening his eyes, the man who had been embracing Yuder as if to imprison Yuder between the chairs gently bit his lower lip as if to say don't worry.

A moist mucous membrane slid smoothly over the reflexively parted lips and delved back in. A low sound was made as the tips of long fingers gently supported the tilted neck. The insignificant sensation of feeling the soft flesh inside the hair merged with something hot deep inside the mouth, and in an instant, a surprisingly sharp pleasure brushed the brain.

The core of desire ignited again, threatening to blur his mind, but the knocking from outside the door brought consciousness back. This time there was a voice as well.

“Commander, may I enter...?”

He thought they were servants coming to clear the table, but it wasn't. Yuder quickly turned his head as soon as he recognized Ever's voice. Just that alone felt like it required tremendous patience.

“...Commander.”

Not liking the muffled sound of his voice as if he had just woken up, he cleared his throat. Kishiar chuckled and kissed Yuder's furrowed brow.

“Hmm?”

Even though he knew why Yuder had called, the tickling sensation of a nose rubbing against the ear and neck caused the shoulders to involuntarily shrink. Yuder, lightly kissing his neck, briefly battled fiercely between the desire to pull the unmoving man closer and the reason to push him away.

But reason won in the end. Barely releasing his hand from around Kishiar's neck, he gestured towards the closed door.

“...We must open the door.”

“We must.”

But contrary to his words, Kishiar remained still even after responding. It was an unusual reaction.

Perhaps Kishiar felt the same regret as he did, and the sensation of his heart tightening and loosening came again. Exhaling hot breath from deep within his throat, Yuder unknowingly reached out and caressed Kishiar's cheek. Unable to fully feel through the glove, but when Kishiar looked up with a profound, smile-less gaze, an indescribable emotion welled up.

Without exchanging words, it was understood.

He felt the same as Yuder.

Yuder changed his mind from pulling away after just one caress and carefully swept Kishiar's eye. The very small, meaningless sound of golden hair brushing against the glove felt strangely loud.

Kishiar also reached out and caressed Yuder's cheek. Like looking in a mirror, the stroking of the same spot ignited an inexplicable emotion. Perhaps it was a tenderness worth naming.

Only then did Kishiar finally straighten and stand up. The emotion just shown could not be felt in the voice commanding to enter.

“Ah, you were still eating. My apologies.”

"It's fine. I was about to call the servants to clear the table. But what happened?"

Ever, who had entered the room, seemed surprised at the sight of a table still laden with untouched dishes but quickly composed herself and reported on the purpose of her visit.

"The members at the security management team, led by Finn, searched all over the third floor of the dungeon where Yuder found it. They say the sound of the wind coming from there is most likely the voice of a person... and possibly even that of an Awakener."

At the mention of a human voice, Yuder recalled the strange wind sound he had heard in that place. When he thought back to when he heard it closest to the wall where the Tain's crest was, it was indeed more like a sharp sound that leaks through a window crack when it snows rather than a normal wind sound.

But it could also be the voice of an Awakener.

"Are you certain?"

Ever nodded at Yuder's question.

"Probably. The sound isn't constant; it's heard for a while and then quiet for about half a day. This pattern has been repeated, the guards testified. Based on that, Jody has listened several times, and he's sure it's a person, and he feels that the sensation is similar to that of an Awakener like himself."

Jody Sliem was a Cavalry member who could scream and launch various patterns of attack. He was much more sensitive to sound than others, and if such a person assured that the voice was like that of someone with similar abilities, there seemed to be no need for doubt.

Yuder turned his gaze to Kishiar.

"It seems most likely that they have hidden people in there after all."

"It seems so."

Ever, noticing the serious expression on Kishiar's face, seemed to catch on to the general content of the ongoing conversation and lowered her voice.

"Did Prince Pruelle find out the information as planned?"

"Yes. It seems they've hidden lifeless objects in the Red Deer Consortium and people in the security management team's dungeon."

"My God..."

Horror and anger darkened Ever's face.

"Ever, did Baron Willhem show any signs of visiting the security management team?"

"No. Not while we were watching. But according to the knights and soldiers, Baron Willhem secretly met with Knight Commander Jeymer Phil a few times a month."

"A few times a month... That's an absurdly insincere interval to feed and manage people regularly."

Kishiar's fingers tapped his crossed arms. Ever waited silently until he had finished thinking and issued his orders.

"Continue to monitor the third floor discreetly without attracting attention. Baron Willhem will surely visit there again in the next few days."

"Understood."

After bowing her head in response, Ever briefly mentioned a few more ongoing tasks at the Cavalry Investigation Headquarters set up in the Security Management Team and concluded her report. She seemed about to leave but then fumbled in her pocket, as she had one more errand.

"Yuder. I took care of the letters that came for you this morning. Here it is."

This had happened before when letters had come for Yuder, and Ever had taken care of it then as well. Yuder thanked her and took the few letters she handed over. Seeing familiar names after a long time, his expression relaxed slightly.

"By the way... did you chew on Reaper grass during the meal?"

"What?"

"Your lip seems swollen. Here."

Ever tapped her lip to show where it might be swollen. Yuder awkwardly felt his own lip, but without a mirror and only feeling it, he could not tell if it was indeed swollen.

But if it was really swollen, the reason was obvious. It was likely due to what they had just been doing.

"..."

Yuder furrowed his brows with an indescribable feeling, then slowly nodded.

"It seems so. That must be... what it looks like."

"Be careful. The pepper herbs in the West are much spicier than in other regions. Even Emun accidentally chewed on some in yesterday's lunch dish, and his tongue and lips were swollen all the way until today."

After leaving kind advice that sucking on ice would help, Ever patted Yuder's shoulder and bid him farewell.

"I will take my leave now, Commander."

Once she left, silence filled the room again. Yuder looked back at Kishiar with a peculiar feeling. He was slightly furrowing his brows, smiling apologetically.

"...Is it really swollen?"

"A little."

Despite having engaged in the same activity, Kishiar looked perfectly fine. Well, the one who had been bitten on the lip during their kiss was Yuder, not him. The first time they had kissed, Kishiar

had suffered a minor injury to his lips, but except for that, there had never been a mark. Perhaps that was just his nature.

“It's fortunate that there was already someone who had mistakenly eaten the pepper herb.”

“I thought you would be upset that I had bitten your lip, is that how you're going to let it go?”

“I won't get angry over something like that.”

“My assistant is indeed magnanimous.”

“It's something I wanted to do, and it didn't hurt.”

Kishiar reacted rather differently to those words, for some reason.

Chapter 385

The man, who had been blinking in silence several times, turned his head away, covering his mouth with his hand. Yuder couldn't help but doubt whether he had said something wrong.

"...Commander?"

"No... Just wait for a moment."

After blocking the approaching Yuder, Kishiar lowered his hand after a while, and turned back to Yuder. The first thing that caught his eye was the fiery look in his eyes.

"I never used to believe that honesty could be the greatest weapon... But you never know until you experience it."

"Pardon?"

"I mean, your words just now pleased me more than any praise I've ever received."

Had not complaining or getting angry because it didn't hurt really deserved to be taken as such great praise? He didn't understand why Kishiar reacted that way to his answer, but he decided not to ask any further since he seemed pleased.

"Yuder."

"...Yes."

What was he calling for this time? Kishiar's red lips curled into a smile at Yuder's slightly delayed response.

"Heal quickly."

"...Pardon?"

"I always wish for your recovery, but never have I wished for it as deeply as I do at this moment."

"I would like that too, if possible..."

But it was not something that could be done at will. Healing his body was now in the hands of Enon, Hellem, and Mick, so there was nothing he could do himself.

Even to find a way to complement Kishiar's skill, he wished that they would find a clue within a short time...

'...No, wait.'

While thinking absentmindedly, Yuder glanced at Kishiar's still-smiling face. Only then did it occur to him that the meaning of that smile might not simply be a wish for a speedy recovery.

And as if he had been waiting for that realization, a low and sweet voice rang in his ears.

"How much I long for the day when you look at me again with those eyes, and the time when we return together to our Cavalry... My assistant probably wouldn't understand."

Our Cavalry.

In the strange emotion that unfamiliar yet familiar words evoked, Yuder found himself unable to say anything.

...

After the Duke of Peletta and his Cavalry, achieved a significant victory at the western edge of the Great Sarain Forest, the monsters' attacks that had been disturbing the borderlands were reduced to the usual levels.

Not only did the Cavalry defeat a giant monster without losing a single man, but they also left their excellent elite members in the Great Sarain Forest to assist with monster subjugation, receiving the praises of the Empire's people living in the borderlands.

Additionally, when the rumor that the Duke of Peletta was confirmed by the Sun God Temple priests in the west to be the true owner of the divine sword began to spread, a new tension began to stir in the capital.

Naturally, it was the high-ranking nobles who had most doubted this rumor that caused the tension.

"...That's absurd. The priests recognized the divine sword?"

The sharp voice that carried far made Kiolle da Diarca halt his steps. His gaze fell on a small rose garden where the Duke of Diarca often enjoyed a leisurely cup of tea with his close friends. Today, too, the Duke was hosting a meeting in that place, famous as the most beautiful section of the extensive garden divided into several sections.

"The Tain Duke's house is keeping it quiet... but there are many who saw him win battles with that sword... It seems it couldn't be denied...."

"The reason I'm doing this now is, of course, to use the health of the Crown Prince as an excuse..."

“Are you going to burden yourself with the legend of the first Emperor...? But please, don't worry too much...”

In contrast to the clanging voice of the Duke Diarca, the voices of those around were faint and weak, barely audible. But what was being said was not difficult to deduce.

The new master of the Cavalry and the Divine Sword. Kiolle scrunched his nose and recalled the central theme of their conversation.

The news that Duke Peletta had become the new master of the Divine Sword had been dismissed as mere rumor since Emperor Keilusa's announcement. But as the achievements of the Cavalry in the West became the talk of the town, the doubters were gradually increasing.

Of course, the Imperial Knights mostly scoffed at the rumor, but Kiolle chose silence over agreement with them, as usual. He had personally seen the power wielded by the Cavalry and the inexplicable and unsettling intimidation demonstrated by the 'Dissolute Duke.'

When Kiolle first heard the announcement that Kishiar was the new master of the Divine Sword, he thought it might not be a political ploy but the truth. His father and others didn't believe it, though.

But judging by the words he had just heard, Duke Peletta seemed to have presented undeniable evidence this time.

If Duke Peletta were playing at being a leader with commoners, the nobles wouldn't care. But if the new master of the Divine Sword could lead those with strength enough to quell more than monsters and achieve great feats, it would be something they could not ignore. Especially in times like these.

The Crown Prince, who was bearing the future of the Diarca family, had been in seclusion for a long time since the assassination attempt by the Apeto family. Rumors spread that he had gone mad. Duke Diarca had tried to cure the Crown Prince while suppressing the rumors, but it was not easy to quell them, even with the Diarca family name.

What would happen if Duke Peletta, the rightful master of the Divine Sword, and the Cavalry returned in such a situation?

Even Kiolle, who had no interest in politics or power struggles, could see how much on edge his father had been lately. It would probably lead to a war without war.

Kiolle thought of Yuder Aile, the only Cavalry member he knew by name. He hadn't seen that arrogant and monstrous guy's face for quite some time. Through the mark of the oath on his wrist, he knew that Yuder was alive and well, but every time he heard news of the Cavalry from the West, Yuder's image came to mind.

'If the rumor about a Cavalry member defeating a monster alone in the Great Sarain Forest is true, it must have been him.'

It was more a conviction than a speculation, something he felt through personal experience.

Kiolle, shivering, decided to stop thinking and head home. He would have, if someone from the group with his father hadn't spotted him and called out loudly.

"Oh! Young Sir Kiolle has returned."

The men, who had been sipping tea in the garden and elegantly cursing Duke Peletta, all looked at Kiolle warmly, lavishing praise upon him. Kiolle recognized his first and third brothers among them and frowned deeply. The brothers also looked at Kiolle, their irritation barely hidden beneath expressionless faces. Only their father, Duke Diarca, welcomed his youngest son with a softer expression and a gesture.

"Kiolle. Have you arrived? Come this way."

"...Yes."

Kiolle headed towards his father, swallowing a deep regret that he should have gone in earlier. As he approached, the courtiers around the duke became excited and began to praise him.

"Young Kiolle truly resembles the duke in his youth."

"It's as if I'm seeing His Highness's appearance from 40 years ago."

Duke Diarca was not particularly pleased that Kiolle had become a knight, but whenever he saw him in the knight's uniform, he gladly accepted such praise.

"Are you just returning now? You're later than I expected."

"Yes, I was a bit delayed as I was discussing the training plan with the Commander."

"The Commander of the Imperial Knights is Theorado Van Tain, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"The one with the most peculiar talent among those from the Tain family, the one who is so obsessed with the sword that he doesn't even go home. I hear his family is quite concerned."

"I also don't often go home due to training."

"Ah, but, of course, Sir Kiolle is different from him."

After responding insincerely to someone who was desperately trying to join the conversation with his father, Kiolle only looked at his father and closed his mouth.

'I wish he would tell me to leave quickly.'

It was more than annoying that he couldn't respond as he wanted due to the vow, but the Duke of Diarca, who by now Kiolle thought would tell him to go, was looking at him with a face lost in thought. Kiolle realized that his aging father's eyes were fixed on the emblem of the Imperial Knights on his chest and felt puzzled.

'Why is he doing that?'

"Kiolle. It seems that you have a close relationship with Theorado Van Tain."

It was more a dull relationship between a Commander and a subordinate knight than a close one, but Kiolle said nothing at first. Duke Diarca, looking at his son as if he had found a good way out from an unexpected place, asked,

"Have you heard anything about the situation in the Tain family lately?"

"Not particularly... no."

"The Duke of Tain says he trusts Theorado most among his nephews, so ask him about it the next time you talk."

"...Yes."

The answer that they were not close enough to have such a conversation was unnecessary to his father. Duke Diarca smiled and lightly patted his son's arm.

"I was angry when you used to make a fuss about becoming a mere knight, but lately, I think it was good that I listened to your stubbornness. Keep going as you are now."

The nobles, who had secretly known about the youngest son's many mishaps, exchanged meaningful glances. Kiolle saw a dark energy in the eyes of his brothers mixed in among them and furrowed his already furrowed brow even more.

'...This is really annoying.'

Chapter 386

It was an incredibly tiresome affair for a Diarca to be born as the youngest son, bearing the strongest resemblance to the father within the family. Even Kiolle, who was born with an aristocratic character and took pride in his status and roots more than anyone, could not like his own siblings. Since he had decided to become an Imperial Knight at an early age, he had not been openly on guard, but the problem began when the atmosphere gradually changed subtly after being tied to a dog-like oath.

He keenly felt the change in the attitudes of those who confronted him if he inadvertently kept his mouth shut. Some people found Kiolle more challenging the quieter he became, and others could not hide their contempt for him.

As for his brothers and sisters, the more Kiolle kept his mouth shut, the more they openly showed their blatant vigilance. Even those who had once dealt with him without fault had recently begun to reveal their suspicions and guards toward Kiolle.

His father, Duke Diarca, was now patting him on the back and praising him for growing up, but his gaze was so intense that it almost felt like a knife cutting his neck.

‘Look at that gaze. He looks like he's trying to kill me.’

His eldest brother, who was the heir, ignored Kiolle openly because of his dignity, but the third one, who did not receive attention from his father, was different. His eyes blazed with anger.

Kiolle pretended not to see his brothers' stares and waited for a moment to speak to Duke Diarca. Right now, someone was skillfully intervening in the conversation.

"Your Grace, I heard you're looking for the people who cured Baron Durmand's migraines. Are you planning to send them to the Bright Palace?"

Baron Durmand, one of Duke Diarca's closest associates, was famous for having tried every possible treatment for his chronic migraines. Kiolle recalled hearing that he had met a commoner healer and miraculously got better.

Could it be that Crown Prince Katchian's illness was so serious that his father would resort to such superstitions? As he was anxiously thinking, Duke Diarca stroked his white beard and smiled.

"Well, I don't really believe it, but since Baron Durmand recommends it so highly, I think it might be worth trying once. It would make the aftermath much more comfortable."

"Then would you like to meet a commoner healer I know? The one I know is quite skillful..."

Not wanting to miss the opportunity, those around began eagerly offering to introduce commoner healers they knew. Kiolle seized the moment and quickly told Duke Diarca that he would retire. The Duke looked at his youngest son's face, full of irritation, and clicked his tongue.

"You've matured a bit, but you still have a long way to go. The conversations at such gatherings can be valuable truths."

Since he had been forced to keep his mouth shut rather than mature, Kiolle brazenly remained silent. The Duke waved his hand, signaling that it was alright to leave.

"Yes, go rest. Ah, and..."

As if he'd remembered something, the Duke added,

"I'm planning to change all the Knights guarding the Crown Prince soon, so there will be a notice to the Imperial Knights. Don't act rashly, just wait."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Isn't it time for you to take on a proper task? The Crown Prince will likely feel more comfortable with you than strangers."

That statement meant he intended to place Kiolle in the closest position to the Crown Prince. Even though there were all sorts of ominous rumors, the Crown Prince was still the Crown Prince. Having the opportunity to get a seal of approval right next to him was an extraordinary privilege more than anything else. Kiolle felt his brothers' wary glances fixed on his face once again. Although he felt an unpleasant irritation bubbling up inside him, he obediently bowed his head and withdrew.

In this way, Kiolle da Diarca's presence grew day by day, and he himself was unaware of it.

To my dear Yuder.

Yuder read the opening of the thickest letter from Gakane among those that had come to him. At first, there were concerns about Yuder's health, and the middle part contained minor incidents that occurred while interacting with the mages of the Western Mage Union, but the latter part was a little different.

...And I was hesitant to write this, but there was an incident a few days ago. Among the newly emerged monsters, there was one that absorbed magic power. It was just one creature, but since the

Great Sarain Forest has been so filled with magic since the opening of the Magic Spring Ruins, it was not easy to kill, as its recovery was too quick no matter how much it was attacked.

The new monster was not only large but also exhibited a remarkable ability to recover in areas filled with magic. The Cavalry members had a hard time figuring this out, and there were moments when lives were in danger.

Normally, I would have lured the monster to the very end by myself and used the opportunity to evacuate my comrades first. But for some reason, I kept thinking about our last conversation. Remember? Even if we don't succeed...

Even if we don't succeed, the best outcome may be that everyone is safe.

Yuder recited these words he had said at the time and continued reading the next sentence.

...So, risking the surrounding terrain collapsing, we just retreated. It was only after retreating and regrouping with others that we could truly grasp the power of that monster. Having already caught a magic-absorbing monster before, I think we found the solution rather quickly.

After writing about how the experience of catching a small Pethuamet helped, Gakane calmly explained how they had caught the monster.

It was a creature easily caught by luring it to an area with less magic, but it felt so futile when we caught it. If I had been stubborn at that moment, I would have died in vain, right?

Though he had suffered a long tear in his chest, Gakane's life was not in danger. He expressed gratitude for Yuder's advice that came to mind at that moment and added that he shouldn't worry about his health.

My injury is almost healed thanks to the mages' help. By the time you get this letter, the bandage will probably be off. If you knew how much I've grown in ability from this experience, you would probably be surprised. Hinn teased me several times, saying that I clearly risked danger to grow!

Yuder read that part several times with a strange feeling, then exhaled softly.

‘...Has the part I was worried about been resolved?’

In his previous life, Gakane died while standing up for his comrades during a monster subjugation. He heard that the body was found torn in the chest, in a horrifying condition. Yes, that's what had happened.

As soon as he read the sentence about the injury, a vague old memory that he had long forgotten faintly resurfaced. Although the specific circumstances might have been slightly different, it was almost identical to this recent incident.

Yuder knew how painful it had been for the Cavalry members who had gone with Gakane to learn that they had survived thanks to his sacrifice. Memories surged, one after the other: the hatred that had stemmed from that place, leading to a fight with the members almost every day; the rage that had felt like a wall, which he had vented as much as possible on Kishiar.

All of it had become as if it never happened.

In the letter, it was lightly written that the mission was successfully completed and not to forget the offer of a commissioning right. However, the weight contained within those words was by no means light.

Gakane, in this life, had safely overcome the crisis just as Yuder had wished.

Yuder had believed it would be so. He believed, and thus he could leave Gakane there and depart. But despite that, the weight he felt when he faced the fact that it had actually happened was somewhat different. Complicated emotions that were hard to describe surged at once, and Yuder was unable for some time to turn to the next page of the letter.

A little later, as Yuder opened the last page of the letter, he narrowed his eyes once again, this time with a slightly different meaning.

... But you know, after this matter ended, there was also an unusual discovery at the Magic Spring Ruins.

The Western Mage Union decided to dig under the ground, thinking that half of the concentrated magic flowing from the Magic Spring Ruins had now seeped out. The Cavalry members agreed to help them dig underneath the rock, and surprisingly, magic ore stones that no one had expected were discovered.

At first, when we dug up just a few, it was fine, but later, when they kept coming out without end, everyone became speechless. I don't know much about magic ores, but having so many large fist-sized ones buried in one place is a rare thing even in the mines?... Thanks to that, the mages are in an uproar.

If Gakane was right, it was tantamount to discovering a new vein of magic ore. That quality magic ore buried in bulk in none other than the Great Sarain Forest, a region stretching across the borders of several countries. A tremendous future with greedy hordes clamoring for it seemed to unfold naturally.

In the previous life, when the whole western region was devastated due to monster occurrences, and human footprints were cut off, leaving only the troublesome Great Sarain Forest, this naturally hadn't happened.

But according to Kanna, it seems that this is not a natural phenomenon. She thinks there might be some old information related to that place that can be read? So she wants to dig more to read the information. I reported to the Commander, but I'm a bit nervous about what he'll reply.

Gakane concluded the new news at that point and wrote that Kanna would soon leave for Tainu as soon as things were settled. Yuder folded the letter after reading that far. The next letters from Kanna and Jimmy contained similar yet different stories from Gakane's perspective.

The numerous magic ore stones that had come from beneath the Magic Spring. And Kanna's significant statement.

What information could she read from beneath that? What could it possibly be?

Chapter 387

"Was there some alarming news in the letters?"

The soft question came as soon as the letters were read and set aside. Yuder looked up and met the gaze of Kishiar, who was sitting not far away, watching him.

"Why do you think that?"

"Your expression is different than usual."

There could be only one reason for a change in expression while reading. Yuder looked down at the letters in his hand and opened his mouth.

"...I was a bit surprised to hear that Gakane was injured."

"Ah. I've heard that news. It's fortunate that he wasn't seriously hurt."

Kishiar nodded slowly, as if understanding. If a close comrade was in danger, anyone would react differently than usual. That wasn't the real reason, but Yuder responded quietly.

"Yes. It truly is... fortunate."

A fortunate event.

In his previous life, what had left an indelible scar on the entire Cavalry was now simply summed up in that one word.

Gakane Bolunwald's untimely death had been the first thing Yuder wanted to change when he returned to the past. But they couldn't be together at the very moment when Gakane was in danger again.

The fact that Yuder could not be with him due to external factors when Gakane was in crisis was the same as in his previous life. However, the outcome was different. It was proof that his own efforts to change the future had clearly had an effect.

Things beyond his reach could be changed.

This gave him renewed confidence that he could also change the death of Kishiar La Orr and everything surrounding it.

'And the future beyond that.'

Yuder looked straight into Kishiar's face, more squarely than ever before. Kishiar briefly tilted his head, wondering at the meaning of that gaze, and then quickly closed his eyes, flashing an attractive smile.

"By the way, did Gakane Bolunwald tell you about the ore vein discovered beneath the Magic Spring Ruins? It's quite interesting."

"Yes."

After answering, Yuder fell silent for a moment and continued.

"Could the vein be the reason why magic started to accumulate there?"

"Well... If I must say, I think it's the other way around."

Kishiar answered briefly and explained.

"Do you know how magic stones form?"

"I know they are produced in places where magic is thin."

"Right. Then have you thought about why places with many magic stones have thin magic?"

Yuder was familiar with the everyday use of magic stones but had never considered that aspect. As he shook his head, Kishiar nodded, as if he had expected that response.

"It's a simple issue if you understand how magic stones are formed. They require magic to be concentrated for a long time and hardened like a rock. So, a place where magic stones are abundant was originally a land with enough magic to be concentrated."

"...So the thin magic in places with many magic stones is the result of the original magic being transformed into stones and being consumed?"

"You catch on quickly."

Kishiar praised him, smiling as he continued his explanation.

"Magic stones are now very common, but they were rare minerals in the past. In the era when the first Emperor was just establishing the Orr Empire, the term 'magic stone' did not even exist. Mages used this as the basis to point to magic stones as the main cause of the phenomenon of thin magic."

Unlike the old times filled with abundant magic power, as time went by, the magic gradually began to thin. Correspondingly, the number of Mages also decreased, and it became harder to find those who could wield outstanding magic.

Kishiar explained that, in contrast to this, the discovery of magic ore veins had gradually increased. Unlike the magic power that naturally existed and circulated in the air, once the power stored within a magic ore was exhausted, it was gone forever. However, no one could find a way to eliminate the emerging magic ore, so even those who, like the Western Mage Union, were trying to solve this phenomenon, couldn't find any particularly good solutions. The Mages had started to focus more on creating magic tools rather than researching magic, and this was ultimately the reason why.

After learning the previously unknown relationship between magic power and magic ore, Yuder carefully sorted out his thoughts.

'If what he says is true, it would be more correct that the magic ores were created because a large amount of pure magic started to accumulate, rather than because of the magic ores found under the magic spring.'

Kishiar was right; the cause and effect were reversed.

Yuder recalled the words Enon had spoken while looking at the Magic Spring Ruins.

The bitter assertion that natural magic wouldn't accumulate so abnormally, so it must have been artificially created.

Kishiar had also previously revealed that the range of the Great Sarain Forest and the range of the magic pooled underground matched so well that it could not be considered a coincidence.

If these words were true, could someone who had trapped the magic under the Great Sarain Forest have predicted that so much magic ore would be created?

‘The history of the abnormal expansion of the Great Sarain Forest reaches back a thousand years. Back then, the term "magic ore" did not even exist, so the chances that they didn't know are higher.’

Who could have performed such a massive task, and if so, what was the purpose, what was the method? Now he couldn't guess at all.

‘In the end, all I can trust is Kanna.’

“Commander, what will happen to the ownership of the discovered ore vein?”

“Basically, it belongs to the country of the discoverer, but that's mainly possible because the discoverers usually belong to the country where the vein is located. This time, the vein could cover the entire Great Sarain Forest, so it might be quite tricky. Well, that's something for His Majesty to worry about. All we have to do is try to finish our investigations before the news of the discovery spreads.”

Yuder agreed, putting down the letters in his hand and turning his head towards the window. The distant view of Tainu seemed slightly different from usual. Until a few days ago, it had been hard to find a place with lights on at night. People, panicked by the explosion and city lockdown, had hidden inside and extinguished their lights early. But now, the number of buildings with lights on was almost as many as when he first arrived.

The clear evidence that the enhanced security by the Cavalry, the Peletta Knights, and the Western Mage Union had helped regain stability.

In some ways, that scenery was also a result he hadn't achieved in the past. Yuder's memories of the West were of a place moaning from the aftermath of terrible destruction.

“It seems like it's about time to head out.”

Following Yuder's gaze, Kishiar stood up from his seat.

Tonight, Kishiar was planning to go out during the night, unlike usual. The ostensible reason was to make a round and encourage those diligently managing Tainu's security, but his real purpose was different.

A few hours ago, they had secretly received news through Ever's messenger service that Baron Willhem, who had mysteriously slipped out of the mansion and made a sudden appearance at the security management team, was now in the area.

Soon enough, as expected, Baron Willhem had begun to make his move, with an impending auction and party on the horizon.

‘Since security was stable and there was no sign of the Star of Nagran moving again, I thought he would begin to act.’

Within the Security Management Team, the Cavalry members, led by Ever, were secretly observing what Baron Willhem was doing. During this time, Kishiar decided to visit the Red Deer Consortium while the guard was down.

They concealed themselves in the darkness, donning black cloaks that hid their figures and wearing their hats upside down as they silently slipped out. Seated on the driver's seat of the carriage parked behind the building was only Nathan Zuckerman, dressed not in his usual knightly attire but the clothes of a common driver. He silently bowed his head in greeting to Kishiar and then took hold of the reins. As soon as Kishiar and Yuder were inside, the carriage departed at once.

"Only three people, but if we compare by strength, it's rather excessive."

Though their numbers were only three, by ability alone, there were two Sword Masters, one High Priest, one Mage, and two Awakeners. It was an extraordinary combination that could not be seen elsewhere.

The carriage swiftly traveled the road, arriving at its destination in no time.

The Red Deer Consortium building, cordoned off with lines to prevent ordinary people from entering, looked ghastly even from a distance. As Yuder disembarked from the carriage, he realized that Kishiar had already magically disguised his face.

"You have arrived," he stated.

Two members of the Peletta Knights, guarding the Red Deer Consortium building, approached and greeted them in a whisper, "The Tainu Knights guarding this place will return in two hours. We will signal you from outside when the time is near."

Under normal circumstances, the Tainu Knights would have guarded this crucial place diligently, but because they were now jointly managing security, an opportunity had been created. Yuder followed Kishiar into the building. Many things had changed since their previous visit, but the most prominent alteration was the large hole conspicuously present on the first floor of the building. It was the trace of an explosion when the Star of Nagran had invaded.

After entering, Nathan Zuckerman was the first to move ahead. Familiar with the way even in the darkness, he led them to the basement.

The door that had once been closed when they came with Graham Willhem now stared at them coldly.

Chapter 388

"Nathan, the key?"

"Here it is."

Nathan Zuckerman easily took the key from his pocket and opened the door. It wasn't a difficult task for him, as Graham Willhem, who was originally in charge of this place, was now in disarray, and securing the key had been no trouble at all.

The sight inside the opened door was markedly different from before. The once dark but clean corridor was now filled with debris and filth, shattered and soiled all around.

‘From the looks of the debris still remaining, it seems that maintaining secrecy was prioritized over cleaning.’

There was also another difference. Despite being the same structure, everywhere they looked felt much larger and more expansive than before. Yuder guessed that this was probably due to the protective magic on this basement having been broken.

‘According to the information Nathan Zuckerman obtained when he infiltrated here alone before, the Star of Nagran had reached halfway before escaping, so the magic that had been in place must have shattered a lot at that time.’

It was fortunate, then, that this made entering all the more comfortable for them.

"The protective magic near the entrance has been mostly shattered. There are no signs of reinforcement, so we'll proceed as is."

Kishiar, who had been looking around, also agreed with Yuder's assessment. They began to move forward cautiously and silently. Although there were many rooms in the basement, Kishiar said there was no need to examine all of them.

"The secret passage is connected to only one room here."

"How do we find that room?"

"We don't have to do anything."

Why else would he have sent the First Prince Pruelle to Graham Willhem, if not to eliminate such a waste of time? Kishiar answered confidently and continued to lead the way until he stopped at a certain spot.

"You see that door inside, with the deer's antler decoration?"

"Yes."

Next to the door Kishiar pointed to, there was a candle holder decorated with a deer's antler. All the doors had similar decorations, but only that one was in the shape of a deer's antler.

"That's the place, he said."

However, Kishiar did not head there right away. He busily moved his gaze around, reading something unseen.

"But... it seems like the flow of magic energy around here is twisted. If part of the spatial protective magic is destroyed, it affects the rest, making it a headache. ...Nathan."

"Yes."

"The core of the protective magic formation is in that room over there. Take this and handle it."

"Understood."

Kishiar took out a magic tool inlaid with a magic stone and tossed it to Nathan. Without hesitation, Nathan Zuckerman drew his sword and headed toward the place Kishiar had pointed out. The protective magic, which had lost some of its original power, revealed itself to warn the unauthorized intruder but was woefully insufficient to stop Nathan. With light footwork, he dodged the magic formation rising from the floor and, at times, swung his sword to easily destroy it, successfully opening the door and entering.

Soon, the flow of air surrounding them changed sharply. The flow of magic energy had altered.

"It's done now."

Without even looking to see if Nathan Zuckerman had returned, Kishiar who had discerned the result raised his hand and began to mutter something under his breath. Golden magic energy arose around him, and an untimely wind began to swirl.

At that moment, Yuder felt a tingling sensation in his left eye, which had turned black, and stiffened his shoulder.

‘...What is this?’

Without a moment to ponder the sensation, the magic that flowed from Kishiar's hand filled the surrounding space, casting a bright light. Yuder blinked his tingling left eye and turned his head. When the light disappeared, his left eye was as tranquil as if nothing had ever happened. Even if he casually touched his eye, only the unchanging, pitch-black darkness would spread out; he couldn't see anything different.

"Why is that?" Kishiar, having finished the magic, turned and asked.

"It's nothing." Yuder shook his head in reassurance.

"Speak up if something feels strange."

Only after shaking his head repeatedly did Kishiar fully conclude the magic and move on.

"I've temporarily halted the protection and alert spells, so now let's open the secret door."

Heading toward the stag-horn ornament, Kishiar nonchalantly raised his hand to it. After grabbing and turning the decoration one full circle, then two in the opposite direction and letting go, a moment later, a heavy, rumbling sound from within the wall was heard.

After the sound echoed for a while, Kishiar opened the previously sealed door. Surprisingly, it was not an ordinary room but the entrance to a staircase leading downward.

'Quite a contraption they've made.'

At first glance, these were devices that had been carefully crafted a very long time ago. They began to descend the stairs. What they subsequently came upon was a long, dark corridor. It was clear from its cleanliness that the Star of Nagran hadn't reached this far.

'The secret trade goods that Duke Tain wanted so desperately to hide must be here.'

The underground passage was longer than they thought. As if judging that there was no need to be on guard this far in, there were no notable dangers in the passage. As they walked, Yuder roughly gauged the direction and distance. It was hard to pinpoint the direction in an unlit basement, but it seemed certain that they were heading in the direction of the adjacent street they had previously noted.

"The way up is in sight."

Nathan Zuckerman muttered in a low voice. Just as he said, a stairway leading up was visible not far off. It was the end of the passage.

They descended the stairs and opened the door at the end. Beyond the silently opened gap, it was pitch dark, and no signs of life were felt. Yuder raised his hand, smelling the unique scent of a basement, and conjured a very small flame so as not to feel suffocated. Soon, part of the interior was revealed under the light.

'This is...'

They had entered a massive underground warehouse. Numerous items, similar to the magic tools they had seen earlier in the Red Deer Consortium, were neatly organized.

Yuder noticed that the items here were classified into sections according to some criteria. In some places, only shimmering magic stones were laid, and in others, only magic tools likely made from such stones were stacked.

However, the first place Kishiar headed was not toward such eye-catching items but an area where shabby bags filled with something were stacked. Drawing his sword, he slightly pierced a bag, and white powder streamed out. Seeing him rub the powder between his fingers and taste it with his tongue, Yuder unintentionally raised his voice.

"It's dangerous."

"It's fine at this level. Hmm... just as I thought, this is Calanesa."

Wiping his hand, Kishiar looked down at the bag, his eyes devoid of warmth.

"Do you know what Calanesa is, assistant?"

"...I do not."

In truth, he knew, but that was the correct answer to give here. Calming his heavy heart, he responded, and Kishiar casually turned his body and answered.

"It's a drug with quite an effective painkilling component, but no one uses it for analgesics. Its hallucinogenic and addictive qualities are excessively strong, making it hard to handle, and overuse can even lead to death by shock."

"..."

"When it began to sneak in from other countries a few years ago, it was imported in the form of a leaf. This powdered form, however, is something I'm seeing for the first time."

It was a dangerous drug, boldly named after Ponesa, as it reminded one of Ponesa's excellent analgesic component.

However, unlike Ponesa, which was strictly managed by the imperial family, Calanesa was smuggled in from other countries and indiscriminately spread in various forms. Yuder had first seen this drug in a case of illegal fighting in the South in his previous life, but since then, the drug had secretly spread among the nobles, treated as a mysterious and fun plaything.

Attending parties, one often saw people languidly stretched out, smoking cigarettes laced with Calanesa or drinking alcohol. Their unique bitter smell and nauseating appearance were common, but those who criticized such behavior were strangely regarded as ignorant.

'Looking back now, the odds are high that this was where it all began.'

At a glance, there were countless bags. With that amount, it could have supplied the entire empire for several years at least.

His teeth ground together at the memory of Graham Willhem's nonsense, saying that despite hiding these things, most of the basement was empty.

"We probably don't need to look at the other items. This is indeed the mid-point of the secret trade of the Tain Duke."

"What do you think we should do now?"

The Tain Duke was likely planning to move or sell the items here through secret auctions and parties. Since the existence of the sought-after items was confirmed, waiting until the planned moment to strike would be the best course of action. However, even knowing that, the sight of the bags of Calanesa in front of him brought feelings of discomfort and unease to the forefront.

"Let's go up and check our position first."

Kishiar said, looking around leisurely as he spoke.

Chapter 389

"Let's come back tomorrow."

"Why tomorrow?"

"We can't just sit around doing nothing until the auction, can we?"

The words that flowed from Kishiar's mouth were in perfect accord with what Yuder had been thinking. Knowing well that Kishiar had no ability to read minds, Yuder hesitated momentarily. Kishiar noticed this hesitation and sent a knowing smile.

"It seems my assistant might be feeling more regret than I am."

"...I'm sorry."

"What is there to be sorry about? I actually brought you here, hoping for that kind of reaction."

‘You brought me here hoping for that?’ Yuder looked up, surprised by these unexpected words. A soft question reached his ears, as if to confirm that he hadn't misheard.

"Why do you think I brought an assistant who hasn't fully recovered to such a place?"

"That's because..."

Yuder, who had not specifically questioned that fact, trailed off.

"I assumed you brought me because I'm your assistant."

"That's not entirely wrong," Kishiar said, laughing quietly.

"There are two reasons. Based on the information obtained by Prince Pruelle, I judged that there wouldn't be much danger this time. That's the first reason. And the second reason is that I wanted to help you gain experience in this area."

"..."

"Both Nathan and the Knights of Peletta have done this sort of thing quite often, but it's a first for the Cavalry. I have no doubt in the competence of my assistant, but you lack this kind of experience, so I thought it would be good to bring you along."

Yuder hadn't realized that Kishiar had brought him for such a reason.

‘...No wonder Nathan was unusually reticent during the entire journey.’

It seemed he had guessed from the start that Yuder had been brought along for that purpose.

Kishiar in his previous life had decided on Yuder as the next Commander and taught him many things, but it had always been a one-sided education, not a flexible experience like this. Though Yuder no longer needed such instruction, the feeling was strangely fresh and unusual.

Kishiar, noticing Yuder's strange expression, narrowed his eyes and spoke, "Don't worry. Since we've come this far, we won't just leave."

The moment Yuder heard that gentle yet cold voice, the unpleasant flame of emotion that had been burning inside him silently extinguished. It was a surprisingly firm response.

If Kishiar had said so, there was no need to worry anymore. More than anything, it was evidence that a solid trust existed within Yuder.

"Now, let's find the exit."

They dispersed for a moment to find the ascending exit. Navigating through the darkness of the vast, cluttered warehouse was a difficult task, but the three people there could handle it with ease.

Yuder walked along the endless rows of shelves, heading towards the area where the magic stones were kept. Everywhere he looked, palm-sized, brilliantly colored top-grade magic stones lay scattered like ordinary pebbles. A scene that would have made the eyes of not only mages but also ordinary people flip with greed, yet Yuder's gaze was colder than those who had carelessly collected and stored the magic stones there.

Large magic stones of that size were primarily processed for decorative purposes rather than for use in magic. Being as beautiful as jewels and possessing a mysterious power known as magic, they were the perfect collection items for the wealthy. Yuder could not understand those who became enthusiastic about collecting magic stones, nor those who attributed meaning to them, but there was one exception. It was the red magic stone staff bestowed upon him by the Emperor of Katchian after successfully completing his 'first secret mission.'

In fact, the item was of no use to an Awakener. Unlike mages, the Awakeners did not utilize magic power. Though it might have some use if already processed into a magic tool, in its pure magic stone form, it was merely a useless ornament. The black thornwood that held it was also not the commonly used white birch or the noble applewood favored by the Founding Emperor, but rather a wood that was prone to decay and weakness, and thus not often used in fine craftsmanship.

Emperor Katchian must have known that the magic stone staff would not be of much use to Yuder. But if the Emperor had bestowed it as a symbol of the Commander of the Cavalry, such a point could not be dwelt upon.

White Commander's uniform, and a black thornwood staff embedded with a red magic stone.

These soon became the famous symbols people thought of when they heard the name Yudrain Aile.

Being the Commander of the Cavalry was neither joyful nor happy, but Yuder never intended to voluntarily let go of those items, at least until death. Though the position was forced upon him by Kishiar, and Emperor Katchian had deliberately offered useless ornaments, once they became his responsibility, he naturally considered them his duty. Like the Cavalry he thought he should carry and lead, the staff was also a pride that Yuder, who never coveted other things, stubbornly maintained.

'Now that I think about it, it was more like an obsession than pride.'

He never regretted the moments he spent sensing the anomalies of the world and trying to solve them. But he had never felt such intense anger and emptiness as when he found out that the things he had protected were taken away by someone else.

But now even such emotions had disappeared. After dying and coming back, what Yuder had shed was not merely the position of Commander, but perhaps also the weight of the white uniform and the staff that he may not have realized he was bearing.

They say that no matter how excellent a person is, they can't see the back of their own head. Perhaps this saying was meant for such cases.

While walking with these thoughts, Yuder suddenly stopped and fixed his gaze on a shelf. He thought he saw a bothersome red glow beneath the faint light of a small flame.

"..."

He thought it was an illusion and increased the size of the flame, but it wasn't. Among the magic stones here, an unusually large red stone radiated brilliant light. There was no way he would not recognize an object he had been familiar with for so long. It was the very magic stone that had been embedded in the staff Yudrain Aile had possessed.

'... Just because I thought of the staff, I didn't expect to run into it here.'

He was startled, but then again, what did it matter if he saw it again? That thing was now just an ordinary magic stone, having nothing to do with Yuder.

'But that aside, its presence here... Does it mean that someone offered Emperor Katchian a magic stone that had been illegally traded in my previous life?'

It was probably someone on the side of a foreign operation, with a high likelihood. Although he had suspected that Emperor Katchian might not be entirely unrelated to the secret trade of the foreign operation, seeing the evidence blatantly exposed in front of him felt somewhat sordid.

"What are you looking at so intently?"

At that moment, a voice suddenly rang out from behind. Startled, Yuder turned his head to find Kishiar, who was looking at the magic stone that Yuder himself had been observing, and quietly exhaled.

"...When did you arrive? At least give me some warning."

"I came, making sure to make noise with my footsteps, but you didn't notice at all."

Yuder, having nothing to say to that, quickly changed the subject.

"Have you found the exit?"

"Nathan found it. He said he'd go take a look first, so I came back to fetch the assistant in the meantime."

Kishiar, in responding, skillfully turned the topic back to the magic stone.

"But why were you staring at that magic stone so intently? Was there something odd about it?"

"No, it's just..."

Yuder turned his gaze back to the stone and then closed his mouth. He couldn't say that he was looking at the reward he had received after killing Kishiar La Orr.

"I was simply looking at it for a moment, thinking that it might have something different about it because it's larger than other magic stones."

"It certainly is big."

Kishiar, accepting the explanation, picked it up without hesitation.

"While the latent magic within it is more than other magic stones, there's nothing else special about it. Do you like it?"

"No."

Without a second thought, Yuder shook his head.

"I don't like it at all. I have no intention of ever holding a magic stone that looks like that."

Kishiar's playful expression was withdrawn, perhaps sensing that the response was too earnest. Yuder turned away from Kishiar's gaze. He didn't want to look at those red eyes, so similar to the magic stone's, side by side.

"Are you here?"

Returning to where they had been initially, Nathan Zuckerman approached with a calm face.

"The exit is over there. I went halfway up and felt human presence from the upper floor, so I came back down for now."

The stairs that Nathan Zuckerman had discovered were hidden behind a shelf full of rolled-up papers. Opening the door and following it upwards, they began to faintly hear human activity and voices from afar, growing more distinct as they ascended.

'...What's taking so long to get a beer! I told you to get it from the third barrel, how many times...'

'Are the new dishes ready yet?...'

From the snippets of sound, they were able to deduce what was behind the door.

"...It seems to be a tavern."

"It appears so."

The voices behind the door grew more distant and then disappeared. After the silence had lingered for a short while, Kishiar lightly knocked on the door. A solid, heavy sound resonated.

"It seems to be a door disguised as a wall... Made so it can't be easily opened from the inside. Let's try pushing it."

"I'll do it."

Yuder volunteered, but Kishiar shook his head.

"Arm strength alone won't do it. Fortunately, the power I possess is suitable for such tasks."

At that moment, Yuder recalled the Awakener power that Kishiar possessed: the ability to push and pull things.

As he remembered this, the door began to rotate heavily without Kishiar even lifting a finger. It didn't take long for a gap wide enough for a person to slip through to appear.

Chapter 390

As suspected, outside the wall was the basement of a tavern.

The smell of old wooden barrels and a haphazard pile of groceries pricked their noses. After the three of them had all emerged, the wall closed again. Looking at it from the outside, one could never have guessed that there was a hidden door.

They took advantage of a moment when no one was paying attention and entered the first floor. The place was packed, and the crowded tables gave no indication that someone had just emerged from the basement.

"I think I know where we are," Nathan Zuckerman muttered quietly, looking around.

"We've been investigating the entertainment district, and this is one of the places we've looked into. It's a mid-point hub."

"Are you new guests?"

At that moment, someone mistook them for customers and spoke up. Kishiar, his face disguised, calmly turned his head and replied.

“Yes. But it seems there are no seats available.”

“Seats can be made. Hey, squeeze over there!”

The man pushed the drinkers seated in the corner, and soon enough, space for three was created. As soon as Kishiar sat down, he casually asked for menu recommendations, even ordering three glasses of a local fruit liquor known to be quite potent. While the waiter was gone to fetch the food, Yuder quietly observed the surroundings.

The first thing that reached his ears were the loud voices of the drinkers next to them.

“Hey! The city gates are finally open, so we can drink, but it's so crowded we can't even breathe.”

“It's because of all the newcomers from outside Tainu.”

“Oh, because of that auction thing?”

“Yes. There were people who just came from afar to stay at the second-floor inn. So, don't pick a fight with those who look like mercenaries. It's dangerous.”

The drinkers, glancing at the tall, large Kishiar and Nathan, became a bit intimidated and quieted down.

“They must think we're mercenaries here for the auction. It's surprising that rumors have spread this far already,” Kishiar also murmured, chuckling quietly.

“I didn't know that people from the consortium were already coming in.”

“Neither did I. I was not aware of any reports about those who entered Tainu claiming to be from the consortium. Right, Nathan?”

“...Yes. I'll check again on what's going on.”

It was Ever and Nathan's responsibility to track those coming into Tainu for the auction or party. Nathan Zuckerman, his face hidden beneath his cloak's hood, looked sharply more focused.

“How will you return?”

“We can't go back the way we came, so we'll have to start from here. We haven't received any contact yet from those waiting on the consortium's side.....”

“...Are those guys the people from the consortium?”

“Yes. Look at their hands. They are definitely southerners.”

Yuder, while listening to the voices of Nathan Zuckerman and Kishiar and idly looking at the food and drink in front of him, turned his head toward the mumbling voices of the drinkers beside them. Three people were descending from the second-floor lodging. Their faces were hidden by thick clothing as if it were midwinter, but their hands, peeking out from the sleeves, were all red.

‘These who came from afar and are affiliated with the consortium... Are they southerners?’

This place was a tavern and inn with a hidden door leading to Tainu's secret warehouse. If the merchants who came to stay here were southerners, there could be only one guess. Turning his head, he saw that Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman were also looking in the same direction.

“...Commander.”

“Let's watch for now.”

The merchants from the southern lands were standing by the counter, as if waiting for someone. Shortly after, an elderly man emerged from the kitchen and began speaking to the person standing at the front of the group. Even as he engaged in conversation, he was giving directions to the food servers, indicating that he must be the owner of the tavern.

'I can hardly hear what they're saying because of the noise.'

He was contemplating whether to use the power of the wind and leaning his head in when suddenly one of the southern merchants turned his head sharply. His gaze was directed precisely towards the corner where Yuder was.

'He's more observant than most.'

A chill ran down his back, but Yuder casually raised his hand, pretending to call the server to take his order. The southern merchant's gaze, which had been scanning in Yuder's direction, was obscured by the approaching staff and soon disappeared.

“Would you like to order anything else?”

It was a different person than the one who took his order earlier. In the weary voice, a fleeting wariness towards strangers was discernible. Yuder, while peering over the server's shoulder at the southern merchants heading towards the basement with the old man, casually replied:

“Another glass of this liquor.”

“You hardly touched what's already in front of you, and you're asking for more?”

Yuder lifted the glass in front of him, downed it in one gulp, and slammed it back down.

“Now it's empty.”

The strong alcohol spread a potent scent down his throat, but it would have no effect on him anyway. The man looked at the glass Yuder had put down, blinked, and with a frown turned away, grumbling.

“I've seen plenty of braggarts who think they can drink, but this is the first madman to down that in one gulp...”

Whatever he said didn't matter; Yuder had achieved his aim of avoiding the southern merchants' eyes. Yuder ignored his grumbling, hastily wiping his wet lips and looking over at Kishiar.

“...Commander, shall we follow them?”

“I was thinking of doing so... Is it alright to drink so suddenly?”

Kishiar asked with a face trying to suppress laughter. What had made him so amused was a mystery.

“I don't get drunk on such things, so it's fine.”

“That's something I'd like to ask in detail, but... Wait. They're back.”

Of course, that didn't mean the server who took their order had returned. The southern merchants and the old owner had somehow returned from the basement. Judging by their leisurely pace and demeanor, it seemed that no one had noticed any intruders.

They exchanged a few more words and then dispersed. The owner headed back to his kitchen, and the southern merchants went to the inn on the second floor. Kishiar's eyes, camouflaged in ordinary brown, didn't miss their retreating figures.

“...It was wise to order Prince Pruelle to investigate. Keep a close watch on their movements as well, Nathan.”

“Yes.”

“Now, let's get up.”

Kishiar stood up and pulled a coin from his pocket, placing it on the table. It was more than the cost of the meal.

“Isn't that too much to leave?”

“I don't skimp on the price of a good spectacle.”

If drinking a strong liquor in one gulp was a good spectacle, then shouldn't that money go to Yuder? However, since Kishiar was the one paying, Yuder didn't say anything more.

They left the tavern and looked around the area. Nathan Zuckerman took the lead, saying that the Red Deer Consortium headquarters building was not far from there, and began to walk. When they

soon arrived back in front of the headquarters building, the Peletta Knights guarding the entrance were startled, their eyes wide open, as if they had seen a ghost.

"My, my lord? What has happened? It's been almost 2 hours, so I was about to contact you..."

"So it has. Everything went well, so don't worry. Where did we leave the carriage?"

They returned to the mansion of Baron Willhem just as they had arrived, by carriage. Nathan Zuckerman, dressed as a coachman, politely saluted and disappeared first, and Yuder headed for the lodging with Kishiar.

During their walk in the darkness of the night, Kishiar remained silent. Yuder, too, was lost in thought about the southern merchants who had already revealed themselves and the secret warehouse, and did not speak first.

'I said we would come back tomorrow. I'm sure Kishiar has something planned in advance... but what is he trying to do?'

The fact that the southern merchants had already come here and located the warehouse was evidence of Duke Tain's impatience. Pruelle had said they were just ordinary merchants, but the southern merchants they had met did not seem so simple.

'Southern merchants... People I have never seen in my previous life...'

In his previous life, when Emperor Katchian was working hard to revitalize the west through trade, the Orr Empire had quite a bit of interaction with the South. The impression of the South among the countries north of the desert was traditionally not good, so it was very surprising. The South was a strange and mysterious place, divided into numerous tribes, with languages and social systems completely different from those of the countries north of the desert. Just as the countries north of the desert had disliked them since the old White Sand Wars, they had also long been distrustful and closed their doors to the northern nations.

Although Emperor Katchian's policy had ended in failure, the South had begun to use that event as a stepping stone to slowly restore diplomatic relations with the countries north of the desert. In that sense, they might have been very grateful to Emperor Katchian.