

Turning 421

Chapter 421

A few paces ahead, Ever's gaze shifted toward the people Yuder was looking at.

"Why those people?"

Apparently, she didn't remember all the faces she had seen during Apeto Family's trial. Yuder kept silent for a moment before speaking.

"Those are Apeto Family's people. The representatives who appeared in the first trial, do you remember?"

"The first trial? ...Oh? Now that you mention it, they do look familiar?"

Only then did a genuinely pleased smile blossom on Ever's face.

"My goodness. How did you recognize that they were here?"

Yuder explained that he had seen them arriving late at the auction house.

"They must have fled to the West because they're so guilty. Yet they still had the audacity to come here. How grateful and joyful I am."

Indeed, he agreed.

"We must isolate those people in a special place."

And if done properly, they might be able to catch the tail of other Apeto Family people who had escaped the trial. Yuder made a small request to the very delighted Ever.

"Before that, can you release them for a moment?"

"Now?"

Seeing Yuder's nod, Ever raised her hand to the members without asking anything further. As the signal to release was given, the members hesitated but soon relaxed their grip, and Apeto Family's fugitives quickly scrambled towards the inner garden.

"What do you plan to do now?"

"Move the others to the security management team first, but just pretend to chase those people and leave them alone until they beg to be caught."

The vast garden surrounding the auction house was now as good as in Yuder's palm. As he reached down subtly, moving the power of the earth, a deep rumble echoed through their feet.

"What did you do?"

"I changed the structure of the garden a little."

Though all escape routes were already blocked, Yuder had added a touch of variation, creating a maze.

Now, Apeto Family's fugitives would face things they'd never encountered before, inside that space.

No matter how much they ran, they could not find the right path, and they would return here, chased once more by terror. How long could those precious people endure?

Their bodies, never having endured hardship, would scream, and there would be no one to heed them. The sight of them wailing as their fine clothes were torn, slogging through muddy pits, was already in his eyes.

Their tongues, so agile in the courtroom, would be of no use in that garden.

Ever, understanding that they would be left alone until they broke their high pride and begged to be caught, burst into a clear laughter.

"My goodness! You want them to taste what it feels like to be hunted! That's much better than just scolding them!"

Ever immediately called a few members and explained the situation, entrusting them with the task of chasing Apeto Family's fugitives lightly. The members, who had learned that the ones who had dared to insult their Commander at the trial were there, quickly ignited with passion.

However, other members who quickly received the information also crowded around, all raising their hands wanting to participate, leading to debates and even fights to determine the order.

Watching everyone fiercely argue that they could chase the fugitives better, without a single person backing down, Yuder thought how much they had changed since they first joined the Cavalry.

To be honest, it was quite nice to see those who sincerely followed Kishiar, stepping forward without hesitation to work for him.

"It's a shame. I wanted to enjoy the thrill of hunting prey in the maze created by Yuder," said Ever, genuinely disappointed as she moved on. They entered the auction house, walking down the hallway, a mess with broken and scattered items.

"Kanna is by the back door where the warehouse is."

The workers who had followed the Awakeners from the Star of Nagan or the Southern merchants captured by Kanna and Robel were not kept with the distinguished guests, in case of unexpected dangers. They planned to transport and confine them separately.

"Kanna!"

"Ever, Yuder!"

Standing in front of the warehouse with a blue roof, Kanna waved with a smile. Next to her stood Robel, his arms and neck wrapped in cloth. Yuder carefully surveyed the dozen or so unfamiliar people under the watch of the Cavalry members behind him before speaking.

"I didn't hear that Robel was hurt."

“I just got nicked while trying to protect the list from those guys. The list is undamaged and safe, so don't worry,” Robel said with an awkward smile on his embarrassed face. But Kanna shook her head as if to deny it completely and explained what had happened.

“Things almost got dangerous because those people didn't care about hurting themselves as they charged in, but Robel helped. That's how he got hurt.”

Kanna and Robel originally planned to find the list first and then capture the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran. But as they found the list, they encountered the Star of Nagran, who were confused due to an unexpected earthquake, and a standoff ensued between the two recognized groups.

At that moment, the rest of their party was momentarily scattered, leaving only the two with the weakest combat abilities to protect the list.

Robel, recognized by his former colleagues, wanted to fight them, enraged by their mocking that he was still alive. His desire to find out Nahan's whereabouts and avenge Marty had clouded his mind.

But hearing Kanna loudly calling out unknown information about Marty, he suddenly snapped out of it.

Seeing one of the Star of Nagran's Awakeners, who would rather self-destruct than fail, he inadvertently recalled Yuder's words and threw himself in, exerting his ability.

His previously considered modest ability, which was to slightly control the wind, did something unprecedented. Robel managed to lift Kanna and the list, who almost fell down the collapsing stairs, and even the Awakener trying to explode, into the air and drop them far away.

He was injured as he tumbled down, hit by debris and attacks, but Kanna safely protected the list, regrouped with her fellow members, and successfully captured the remaining the Star of Nagran.

“If Deputy Commander Kanna hadn't told me about Marty back then, I would have probably messed up the job in blind revenge, not even recalling Yuder's words. I wouldn't have realized the true use of my ability. I never felt so at ease before,” Robel said, looking extremely relaxed despite his wounds. It seemed as if he had partially escaped from the heavy burden that had been weighing him down.

“What did you tell him, Kanna? When did you learn about Marty?”

Kanna grinned slightly in response to Ever's question, asked in a hushed voice.

"That short tie that Robel was carrying was given to me in advance by a person named Marty. When I touched it by chance, the information was somewhat readable. Marty... she was really worried about him."

More than any good advice, it was ultimately emotions that best move a person's heart. Kanna had succeeded in stopping Robel, releasing the information she had read with an expertise incomparable to before.

In some respects, it was a power far stronger than a fearsome weapon or the ability to blow up an entire building.

"Our captives are almost unconscious, but you can wake them and ask questions if you want."

"That's okay. I'd like to see inside the warehouse."

Yuder turned his gaze to the closed warehouse door.

"Oh, because of the secret passage?"

Kanna guided him, seemingly knowing why he wanted to see it.

"Here it is. Be careful following me; things have spilled everywhere. Uh... see below that shelf?"

Among the counterfeit items that had been scattered and tangled, a small hole was visible below the twisted shelf. It was a passage just big enough for one person to get through.

"It's a tunnel dug through the floor, and when the lid is closed, it just looks like the floor. Luckily, I got my hands on it and figured it out quickly."

After realizing that those who should have been inside had disappeared, Kanna immediately used her abilities. No matter how stealthy the passage, as long as the thoughts of those who had used it remained strong, there was no way to avoid her ability.

"Did you go inside?"

"Yes. The exit is near the north gate, a little away from the auction house. I came back because it looked like they'd already escaped. I want to read a bit more before their information gets erased. Sorry, I couldn't catch them."

Kanna had no reason to be sorry in Yuder's eyes. She had been busy participating in the mission as soon as she returned, yet she performed more reliable actions than anyone else. What could she possibly be sorry for?

Ever seemed to think the same way and comforted Kanna by holding her.

"What are you talking about? It was my job, but since I was late, it's my fault. If it weren't for you, Kanna, we wouldn't have known about that passage for a long time. Why do you say that? I can't tell you how grateful I am to you."

"It was my job to stop those inside from getting out. If we must find fault, I would bear the most blame."

Upon hearing Yuder's response, Kanna's eyebrows dropped, and she tightened her lips. Even though she hadn't shown it, she seemed quite frustrated for having missed the southern merchants.

"Thank you. But neither of us is at fault, so please don't say that."

In truth, since they knew where the southern merchants came from and where they were headed, there was no major issue this time. Moreover, even the Calanesa powder they had taken was not real.

Kanna knew this fact too, but she couldn't help feeling a little disappointed and smiled faintly.

"I wanted to show our Commander that I did better when reporting my return."

It wasn't fear of making a mistake or worry about getting scolded. It was a statement that showed how much Kanna respected and trusted Kishiar as her leader.

That trust and confidence, entirely different from her previous life, settled Yuder's heart more securely than ever before.

Chapter 422

"Then I'll go ahead now."

"Ah, Yuder. You should take this with you."

As Yuder stepped outside, Kanna handed over a bundle of papers she had been holding tightly. That ordinary bundle, tied with a string, was the list of those who had attended the auction that day.

In addition to the guests, this list, which included the names of those who had actually prepared the auction and related parties, would become the best evidence to prove and corner someone's unjust actions in the future.

"Please deliver it to the Commander. See you later!"

"Okay."

Yuder nodded and leaped into the air, soon becoming distant from the waving figures of Ever and Kanna.

Though the journey here seemed very short, the way back was strangely long and slow. No matter how much he sped up, jumping twice as high as before, Baron Wilhelm's mansion still seemed infinitely far away.

The reason was simple. It was his impatience to get back a little faster.

In his previous life, the journey back after completing a mission had never felt so slow and frustrating. There was no reason to return early, nor anyone he particularly wanted to see.

But now, Yuder was painfully regretful that he couldn't run a little faster.

Leaping off the wind, he bounded over a few roofs, his shadow momentarily grasping a giant branch and then soaring across the night sky of Tainu. His pace was so fast that an ordinary person might not even recognize him passing by. Finally, the entrance to Baron Wilhelm's mansion appeared in Yuder's view.

The two windows from which he had escaped a few hours ago were still wide open.

Without another thought, Yuder poured all his strength into his feet. The wind's force wrapped around his legs and then exploded, propelling him into the air. In the moment he jumped over the sharp, thorny iron fence without a scratch, like a bird, he noticed a pair of red eyes looking at him from the open window.

At the same time, the surrounding time slowed down infinitely. His sharpened senses dulled, and his unacknowledged impatience extinguished like a wet match.

Only those eyes felt like the only thing existing in this world.

Joy sparkled and shone in Kishiar's eyes as he stood in the window, opening his arms without hesitation.

Before he even realized what it meant, Yuder took one last leap off the wind and jumped through the window, where strong arms eagerly embraced him. The two bodies fell back into the room, collapsing together.

Yuder lay in Kishiar's arms, catching his breath. The warmth of the body beneath him enveloped him with every rise and fall of the chest.

"Did you have a good trip?"

As if savoring his scent, a smiling voice tickled his ear as he took a deep breath.

"...Yes."

"Any injuries?"

"None."

As if to make sure, Kishiar felt Yuder's back, arms, and legs, and when his fingers reached the nape, pulling off the hood, tangled black hair and eyes still tinged with gold were revealed.

Caressing the clean and pale cheek without a single wound, Kishiar finally wore a satisfied smile.

"I see."

"First... please accept this."

Yuder firmly handed over the list to Kishiar, ensuring that he didn't drop it. Yuder knew better than anyone what it was, and how important it was, but Kishiar, seemingly unconcerned, did not even unfold it, casually laying it down beside him. It seemed as though embracing Yuder and indulging in the aroma of his body was more important, as the touch of his hands was endlessly gentle and affectionate.

With each touch, shivers ran down Yuder's spine, but he barely managed to recall where and when they were.

"Now, please let go. Isn't it heavy?"

"On the contrary, it's so light that it's a problem. Just a little longer like this..."

In the past, Yuder would have immediately risen whether Kishiar said so or not, but not now. Yuder fell into silence for a moment, then slightly relaxed his body. Kishiar lightly kissed the tip of his nose, as if to say he had done well.

On the floor, not even a bed, daringly lying on the body of a duke, yet feeling as if he had returned to his rightful place, he was enveloped by this profound sense of security.

"But..."

"Hmm?"

"Why are your clothes so disheveled? Has something happened?"

As Yuder's captivated mind began to return to normal and he regained his usual calm, he noticed something he hadn't before.

Beneath the dim lantern that faintly lit the darkness, Kishiar appeared almost undressed compared to when Yuder had left. He was so scantily clad that his body was more exposed than when they shared a bed to sleep.

Surely, Kishiar had planned to feign sharing a bed with Yuder here while waiting, but he had not said that he would be so undressed at that time. They were planning to infiltrate Baron Willhem's mansion, and Kishiar was supposed to deliver the final blow once all the intruders were dealt with. Could it be that he hadn't finished there yet?

Kishiar let out a suspicious and secretive smile, noticing Yuder's question.

"I've finished everything here according to plan. Though I did let Nahan escape. Did you know he came this way?"

"Ah, yes. I thought he might be, since he was missing from the security management team and not in the auction house. But you missed him... Is Nathan Zuckerman okay?"

If Nahan and his companions had come to Baron Willhem's mansion to kill Graham Willhem as Kishiar anticipated, it was Nathan Zuckerman's job to handle them. Kishiar had decided it, and Yuder, confident that he wouldn't easily be pushed back by Nahan or any other Awakeners, had been eagerly awaiting the result.

"It's fine. He seems to have taken a hit to his pride, though, since he caught Hosanna, one with teleportation ability, but still let him escape."

Even though Hosanna was caught first, he managed to escape alone against Nathan Zuckerman? Annoyingly, he was good at running away.

'But there are others who are really good at running away on our side, too.'

"Actually, I lost some southern merchants on my end. There was an additional passage I didn't know about."

Yuder confessed his failure, thinking of Kanna, and added one more thing.

"That's largely my fault, so if there needs to be a penalty, give it to me."

"Why would it be the assistant's fault?"

Kishiar finally sat up, his gaze deeply settling on Yuder's face as if searching for something. Yuder blinked, noticing only then that Kishiar was not only half-dressed but also without shoes. His appearance was so inexplicable that Yuder could not guess what had happened.

"Was there something else besides the passageway?"

The man who had casually perched on the chair, not minding his bare feet, opened his mouth to ask.

Yuder briefly reported on Kanna's fortuitous return, which could be seen as a variable but was rather a stroke of luck on their part, and the events that occurred during the mission. There were incidents, like Robel's injury when facing the Star of Nagran and Ershi that almost went berserk, or the Apeto family fugitives found among the guests, but still, Kishiar gave a small nod at the words that they were able to complete everything as planned.

"So it happened. Kanna returned at an opportune time."

"Yes."

"So, the reason you tried to blame the flight of the southern merchants on yourself was because of that?"

"..."

Silence was answer enough. The man who noticed Yuder's attempt to cover for Kanna and placed blame on himself concealed his eyes and burst into laughter.

"I thought you were hiding something serious when you suddenly blamed yourself, but I'm relieved that wasn't the case. It was merely the result of warm camaraderie."

Yuder was momentarily taken aback, having not anticipated that Kishiar would accept his words in that way.

"I didn't expect you to see it that way. I apologize."

"No, it's fine. It was a fine display of comradeship. I just find it amusing, so don't worry about it."

Kishiar laughed a little more and then reached out his hand to Yuder.

"Sit here. A lot has happened here too, in your absence. You must know what you need to know before you go out."

"Was there something else besides Nahan's escape? Oh, did some problem arise because I came back too late?"

"Um... if it's similar, then it's similar."

Yuder was about to say that he didn't care at all if rumors spread that he had been in a break room with Kishiar for several hours, but Kishiar was quicker to open his mouth.

"Well, the Duke of Peletta simply did what befits the Duke of Peletta. Finding some interesting characters in the process was just a bonus."

With a face that seemed both playful and genuinely refreshed, the man who had spoken as if in jest began to tell his story.

Yuder attentively listened, not wanting to miss a single word of what he was telling.

At Baron Willhem's mansion, all the intruders were dealt with, and nobles raised their voices before Kishiar, who had been waiting, and among them, one person who attracted attention with an unusual demeanor.

Yuder noticed the pleased expression on Kishiar's face as he spoke about a man named Lord Koelt, realizing that he had taken a considerably positive interest in the man.

"...So after wrapping up the matter, I subtly probed the other nobles to find out about him. Some rather interesting stories emerged."

Yuder felt a strong sign in Kishiar's eyes asking him to quickly ask him what the interesting story was. Yuder, following his wish, opened his mouth and asked,

"What story might that be?"

"Lord Koelt, like Baron Willhem, was once part of Duke of Tain's jurisdiction. Up to a few decades ago, his family, along with Willhem's, managed various parts of the western region of Tainu."

Both families were once prestigious, working hand in hand with the duke to lead the West. However, Baron Willhem's ambition to monopolize power gradually distorted their relationship. By the time of the previous Duke of Tain, this became more pronounced, and eventually, the Koelt family lost everything and fell into ruin.

Still, the reputation of the family that had long managed Tainu remained intact. Even after their fall, the Koelt family did not cease their personal dedication to the West.

The current Lord Koelt continued to sponsor the humble temples his ancestors had supported and assisted orphans in becoming independent. He was also quite a renowned scholar.

Baron Willhem seemed to have often expressed his anger in private, saying that he still thought he still mattered in Tainu.

"So, rather than cutting off all ties, he seems to have enjoyed summoning him to events like this to reprimand him. Judging by the fact that Lord Koelt came despite expecting to be ignored, he is no ordinary fool either."

Although he called Lord Koelt foolish, Kishiar's eyes contained a fondness for meeting a desirable talent.

"You seem pleased."

"Do I?"

Smiling, Kishiar reached over and brushed Yuder's forehead.

"Yes. I quite like such people. Very much so."

"..."

His eyes were candid, and Yuder knew that "such people" included him. The phrase "I like" sounded strange all of a sudden, so Yuder closed his mouth and didn't respond. Tilting his head, the man grinned as if amused by this reaction.

"Anyway, I'm actually considering the possibility that Lord Koelt might be one of Pruelle van Tain's sources of secret information. That will become clearer as I investigate further."

"That seems highly likely."

Pruelle had been obtaining a lot of information through friends from his childhood spent in Tainu. Who exactly had informed him remained a secret, but the high quality and speed of the information he had acquired thus far indicated that it wasn't just from those working beneath him.

"So, after finding out more about him, what do you intend to do?"

"Put him to use."

Kishiar responded without hesitation.

"I was hesitating a lot about who to recommend for work in the West after Baron Willhem's influence waned. I was shamefaced for not having a name to put in a letter to His Majesty, but now I can write with confidence. I cannot tell you how relieved I am."

Satisfaction welled up in the crimson eyes. Yuder quietly contemplated it, thinking,

‘It really is completely different from my previous life.’

The western region in his previous life was shattered by the mass emergence of monsters. Rebuilding the west through trade was a policy promised by Emperor Katchian, but its failure resulted in an endlessly slow recovery. Except for a few nobles who profited from the policy, most lost their homes and wealth.

With people becoming destitute, the west turned into a breeding ground for crime, a veritable headache. Even the nobles who had lived there for generations struggled to manage, and it was hard to find anyone willing to take on the task.

Among them, Tainu's case was the worst. There were recurring complaints from the Duke of Tain, unable to find a suitable person to manage Tainu, his domain.

It must have meant that, unlike now, the Duke of Tain had entirely lost the public's favor in the west back then.

But if someone like Lord Koelt were to manage Tainu, together with the successor of the Duke of Tain – Pruelle's younger sibling – it could be reborn into something far better than before.

Now there would be no monster invasions, no shattered cities, no individuals blinded by greed and willing to buy and sell anything.

"...That's good. It would truly be fortunate for the people here."

Yuder finally felt a weight lifted off his shoulders and his lips curled into a smile.

"You must have had a deep attachment to the West? Seeing how happy you are."

Kishiar softly asked.

The two locked eyes in the quiet darkness.

'Ah. I see.'

Yuder suddenly realized that the current Kishiar did not know the true cause of his joy.

Despite it being a natural thing, a difficult-to-explain emotion washed over him, and his joy slowly faded.

He maintained his silence for a long time before responding in his usual tone.

"...Yes. It seems so."

Red eyes stared at his calm lips for a long time.

...

"Is anyone there? Get me out!"

Baron Willhem, trapped on the third floor of the security management team's underground dungeon, was somewhat deflated by the fact that no one came despite his shouting all night.

Thinking about the previous night was terrifying. The mysterious assailants targeting his life when he was transporting the 'horses' entrusted by the Duke of Tain; the treacherous southern merchant who fled, leaving him behind; and the Cavalry who knocked him out without hesitation and threw him here.

What enraged him most was, naturally, the last part.

"Damn lowlifes. How dare they put me here...!"

Although it was somewhat of a misunderstanding, he was practically the master of Tainu, a noble. Even if he was subject to an investigation, it was proper to send him home first. He had never heard of such treatment before. It was the worst.

The Baron incessantly pondered what he would say once he left this place. In the absence of someone to listen, it was a fruitless effort, but he couldn't help it; the prison was too cold.

He had not known that the prison was this cold, even though he had frequented it for so long.

The wind seemed to be leaking from somewhere, and no matter how much he wrapped himself in his cloak, the cold wouldn't go away. The stone floor, without a single straw to use as bedding, was so hard and painful that it gave him the shivers to touch it. There were no patrolling soldiers, and no one to ask what was going on; he was unable to receive help no matter how much he yelled. He didn't even have anyone to ask what had happened.

'I must quickly inform Duke Tain of this fact.'

The auction would have proceeded somehow even without him. It had to. Even if the cavalry brutes had caught wind of 'words' about me, finding evidence would not have been easy. They should not have dared to do this to me just because of the common people's words.

'If only Duke Tain learns of this fact...'

Crouched and trembling with only that thought in mind, suddenly there was the sound of a door opening somewhere. The footsteps were not of one person but several. The startled Baron, who jumped to his feet, quickly grabbed the bars and shouted loudly.

But moments later, when Baron Willhem recognized the ones approaching where he was imprisoned, his eyes widened in disbelief.

"What, what is this...?"

"..."

The ones led by the soldiers, half-unconscious and covered in dirt, were known to Willhem.

They were nobles from the Apeto family, who had been staying in Tainu for a while due to recent unpleasant events in the capital. Why had those who were clearly supposed to attend yesterday's auction come here in such a state?

While Baron Willhem was unable to continue speaking, they disappeared into another area without even properly opening their eyes. A short while later, the soldiers who had imprisoned them returned. Only then did the Baron come to his senses and shake the bars again.

"Hey! Listen to me! Quickly release me! Don't you know who I am? I am the master of the House, Baron Willhem!"

At that, the soldiers stopped. One soldier opened his mouth with a calm expression.

"If you wait a little longer, your turn will come. Others will arrive."

"What? Wait? What do you mean, wait! Release me! Where is Duke Peletta, or rather, where is the Commander of the Tainu Knights! Why has no one come even though I'm here!"

The soldiers, looking down at his outburst, disappeared without even answering.

These people, living on the money he provided, how could this happen? He was shocked and shouted for them to come back, but their footsteps quickly faded into the distance. The Baron was left alone once more.

Something had definitely gone wrong.

Something was undoubtedly wrong, and the fact that he couldn't even know what it was drove him mad.

The Baron clenched the bars with a desire to scream in anxiety.

It was an eternity later that he was led out of the prison by other soldiers.

"...Goodness. Your state is beyond words for just one night."

Occupying a space within the security management team prepared for interrogation, Duke Peletta looked back at Baron Willhem and smiled a genuinely ominous and bright smile.

Chapter 424

“You look quite weary. Would you like some wine?”

Baron Willhem eyed the glass that Kishiar offered and shook his head. His throat was parched, but it was more important to glean more information about the situation.

“That will be fine. But tell me, Duke, why am I imprisoned here?”

“I should be the one asking. Why were you here last night with the intruders when you should have been at the charity party?”

Kishiar inquired, tilting his head.

“Is it so strange for me, who manages Tainu, to be with the security management team? I only came here for urgent matters and happened to run into them.”

“Urgent matters, you say.”

Kishiar repeated Baron Willhem's words.

“Is this related to the others that you supposedly rescued from the prison with your servant? I've heard that they were imprisoned there for a long time without any charges.”

The question referred to the ‘horses’ he had kept to sell as slaves. They were ones he would never have had to concern himself with had he managed to pass them on to the southern merchant properly.

‘Is that why he imprisoned me?’

Baron Willhem swallowed his dry saliva and used the excuse he had thought of while confined.

“You're not saying that you believe those prisoners over me, who served His Highness the Duke and Cavalry with all my sincerity? They are criminals who tried to sneak into the Empire from other countries! I didn't bring them out; they joined hands with the intruders to attempt escape. I almost died at their hands last night!”

How could one be thrown into prison without proper verification of facts from both sides? If this were known, the honor of the Cavalry would vanish like bubbles, and the Baron, spitting in his demand to clarify the responsibility, finally caught his breath.

Having listened to the Baron's words, Kishiar asked as if to confirm,

“So you mean that you came here alone during the party, without notifying the Tainu Knights and the Cavalry, for urgent matters that have nothing to do with those claiming to have been imprisoned here or the intruders?”

“Yes.”

“So it was merely a coincidence that they attempted escape from the prison just when you were here, and the intruders came to help them?”

By now, one would have expected him to show signs of being shaken, but the smiling face of Duke Peletta, continually asking as if confirming something, didn't change at all.

Baron Willhem felt an inexplicable sense of foreboding creeping up his nape at the Duke's excessive composure.

“What exactly was this urgent matter that you were so concerned about?”

“That is... an internal secret of Tainu. I cannot disclose it without the Duke of Tainu's permission.”

“Even if I say that I think I know the answer?”

Baron Willhem opened his mouth, intending to assert that the ambiguous question shouldn't confuse him.

If Kishiar hadn't started casually flipping through a stack of documents nearby, he would have been able to say so.

‘...What's that?’

Seeing the writing on the front of the document, Baron Willhem turned pale and stopped speaking with his mouth agape.

If he wasn't mistaken, it was undoubtedly the list prepared for the auction house.

He couldn't fail to recognize it since he had personally checked and approved it. But how had that list fallen into the hands of Duke Peletta? How? Since when?

Kishiar's eyes gently flickered open, seemingly feeling the blood-red gaze of Baron Willhem, who shuddered momentarily at the thought of the nobles of the Apeto family, carried unconscious into the dungeon.

"Right after you were captured here last night, there was an uproar involving intruders at the party hall and even in some of the old mansions nearby," he said. "My loyal officers, who rushed there to maintain the peace of Tainu, witnessed some astonishing events. Prominent people from the West had gathered, innumerable in number, waiting for an illegal auction to defy the Empire's law. Can you believe it?"

"Invaders at the party hall too? Are my family safe? What about the guests...?"

"Some unfortunately met their fate at the hands of the invaders, but luckily, your wife and daughters are safe. However, that's not important."

"Not important!"

Desperately trying to change the subject, but to no avail, Kishiar unfolded the bundle of papers in his hand again.

"I believe you came here last night for a reason closely related to what's written in these documents. If my speculation is wrong, please correct me?"

Baron Willhem was unable to respond for a long time. Even his normally smooth cunning wouldn't cooperate at this moment.

His head was spinning, and he felt a pounding headache. He just wanted to sit down, but there was no chair for him to sit on. Unfamiliar with the situation where he had only himself to rely on, Baron Willhem was at a loss.

'I must absolutely deny it.'

That was the only thought in his mind.

Regardless of how much Duke Peletta knew, he had to keep it unrelated to Tain. Even if he failed in his task, the moment it was connected to Duke Tain, his life would be over.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I don't even know what's written in those documents, let alone an auction?"

"Everyone present there mentioned your name. Still, you don't know?"

"I know nothing about it."

"This list details the names of those who prepared the auction. Your name isn't there, but the name and approval seal of the Red Deer Consortium, connected to you, is stamped right at the top. Will you continue to claim ignorance?"

"The merchant group's matter is something Graham took care of. I genuinely don't know much about it. If there's a problem with the merchant group, shouldn't you arrest Graham first?"

"Hmm."

Only then did Duke Peletta's expression change slightly.

Come to think of it, he had mentioned that Baron Willhem's wife and daughters were safe but hadn't said anything about Graham Willhem, who had been weak-minded after almost being kidnapped by the Awakeners and was staying at the Baron's mansion.

What had happened to him, entangled in all this? He might be dead. Even if he wasn't, he was the only blood relative who worked closely with Baron Willhem and had deep connections to the Red Deer Consortium.

The moment he thought that, Baron Willhem's mind sparked like lightning with the realization that his younger brother Graham was the best person to pass the blame onto. The Baron's eyes, damp with sweat, sparkled.

"I took him in without question, thinking him unfortunate after suffering from the incident, but now that I think about it, it seemed like he was doing something secretive even from me lately."

After insisting for a while that it was all to prepare for an illegal auction behind his brother's back, Baron Willhem fired off his final words.

"I have never worked once for personal greed. If I had known that such a wicked act was happening in Tainu, I would have eradicated it already, if not for myself, then for His Grace, the Duke of Tain, who entrusted me with this place's affairs."

It was clear that someone had schemed all of this to happen precisely when he had hurriedly stepped in to take care of matters. And it was clear that his younger brother, Graham Willhem, was involved in this plot. The claims fit together all too well.

"What's more, the truth is the truth. I worked only for the Duke of Tain, and not for myself, so how could anyone lay blame on me?"

Though he felt a little sorry for his younger brother, the lives of himself and the Duke of Tain were the first things that needed to be considered. As it was a matter of business, if his younger brother were to take responsibility and claim the blame, the Duke of Tain would surely not ignore him.

For everyone's sake, that was the best course.

"If you permit me, I will interrogate Graham myself and reveal the truth. That traitor who betrayed His Grace, the Duke of Tain..."

"...Is that so? What do you think?"

Baron Willhem paused at Kishiar's question, which came just as he was in full flow. The door then opened, and there, being escorted by the soldiers, was his younger brother, Graham Willhem, the very one he was trying to pin the blame on.

The Baron swallowed his breath, noticing his brother's swollen, glaring eyes fixed on him. A choked mutter escaped him.

"...Graham."

"Along with the others at the auction house, your brother stood there at dawn, testifying that all of this happened because of your orders. I'm curious who's lying here," said Kishiar.

The Baron's tongue seemed to have frozen in place.

Graham Willhem had been taken from his residence the previous night by the Cavalry and brought to a remote house. After receiving the exceptional healing power of Priest Lusan, he had somewhat regained his senses. The brothers, who now knew what had happened, had decided, mirror-like, to pin the blame on each other. Kishiar looked at the stony-faced brothers, whose faces were so alike, and sent them a friendly smile.

"It seems difficult to proceed with the investigation like this. I'll give you some time, so discuss it well between you."

From the prison, indeed. Duke Peletta smiled, and at the same time, the soldiers grabbed the arms of the two men. Baron Willhem screamed, his head lowered.

"Don't think His Grace, the Duke of Tain, will overlook this absurdity!"

"Yes. I'm also looking forward to the Duke of Tain's reaction when he hears this news."

Kishiar answered calmly, smiling.

Chapter 425

At that time, in the main residence of Duke Tain in the capital.

Normally, by this hour, the Duke of Tain would have already departed for the gambling den. However, he had not yet left his study. He paced around with an irritated expression, attempting to calm himself by sitting down and sipping tea, but his gaze never stopped wandering restlessly about the room.

There was only one reason for his anxiety: he had not received any word from the West, despite the fact that everything should have been settled by now.

Neither Baron Willhem nor the loyal southern merchants had sent any news. He had even summoned a mage to activate the magic communication device connected to the Willhem family, but no answer had returned. This was a first.

Though it had only been a day, it felt like an eternity had passed. Unable to bear the anxiety, the Duke eventually filled a short pipe, engraved with his family's crest, with tobacco. He was just about to light it when a moment came.

A heavy knocking, followed by a voice from outside, rang out.

"Your Grace, some visitors have arrived."

"Let them in at once!"

The Duke's eyes brightened momentarily at the news of a visitor but twisted into disappointment the moment he saw the people entering. They were not the ones he was waiting for.

"...Theorado? And others as well... What brings you here without notice at this hour?"

"Oh, Your Grace, it seems you were expecting someone else? The butler did not mention... If you're busy, perhaps it's better to meet another time?"

An elderly man standing next to Theorado, the Commander of the Imperial Knights, asked in a seemingly gentle voice. He was a distant relative of the Duke of Tain and had served alongside the previous Duke, making him a person not to be trifled with. The man had been retired, living in a southern villa, and it was unclear when he had arrived.

Along with the old man, all those accompanying Theorado were members of the Tain family.

Why had so many of them suddenly gathered here all at once?

A bad premonition came to him, but the Duke nodded for now.

"No... no, it's fine. Come in."

With his permission, over a dozen people entered the study. At the end of the line, the Duke spotted two familiar yet foreign faces after a very long time.

A young man and woman with red hair resembling the Duke's greeted him with an elegant bow.

"Hello, Father."

"Pruelle, Priscilla? What brings you two here?"

"You're speaking strangely. Are we not allowed to visit the main residence?"

Pruelle answered with an impeccable smile.

Though they lived in the capital, the Duke of Tain and his children did not share a home. Living separately in another mansion in the 3rd District, their sudden arrival with other members of the Tain family was nothing if not strange.

The Duke of Tain turned his head toward Theorado and the others, his eyes filled with suspicion and wariness.

"Your Grace, we have come here today to hear your response to certain voices within the family, claiming that over the past few years, you have been deceived by foreign swindlers, plunging our family's prestige and financial state into serious crisis."

The old man who met the Duke's eyes answered quietly.

"At first, we hoped it was merely a rumor. However, upon investigation, we found that indeed, over half of the Tain family's most significant assets have been pledged or already disposed of without consent, either held as collateral or already sold off."

The elite knights who were supposed to work for the family were mostly tied down in meaningless places for the Duke's business, rather than in the west where monsters were likely to appear. Moreover, many of those who had managed the family's fortune for generations had suddenly been driven away within a few years. Endless stories of the Duke's arbitrary actions flowed from the old man's lips.

"What do you think of this?"

"This insolence! How dare you pry into what I, the master of the family, am doing?"

The Duke retorted sharply.

"This is absurd. I don't know whose words you've been listening to, but if you've come to dispute my business, leave at once!"

"Is that the only answer you will give?"

"Answer or not, why should I endure such an insult from you? Were these the words of those who were driven away? Theorado, I am greatly disappointed if you, who should know the situation, have also believed and joined them. Was it you who brought the children?"

Theorado did not respond. Instead, another stepped forward, letting out a dry laugh.

"Ha ha, it wasn't anyone who brought them. Quite the opposite. They informed us of this fact and gathered us themselves."

"...Who, gathered?"

The Duke asked, doubting his own ears.

"I trust that the master of the Tain family will not be unaware of the family's traditions and laws. If it is judged that Your Grace, the Duke, has fallen into a physical and mental state too dire to function, those with the qualifications of the heir can summon us."

"And today, a meeting will be held here to decide the second child, Princess Priscilla as the next heir."

"...What?"

At the consecutive words, the Duke was at a loss for words. His gaze, filled with anger, turned towards Pruelle and his daughter Priscilla standing beside her brother. His furious eyes scanned the unfamiliar faces of his children.

"What nonsense is this, to hold a meeting I've neither heard of nor agreed to? What do you think you're doing?"

"We know what we need to, Father."

Pruelle calmly replied.

"And we also know that the answer you're waiting for from the west will never arrive. Everyone knows, not just me."

Pruelle smiled gently, patting his younger sister's shoulder. Priscilla, her long red hair neatly tied, looked defiantly at her father.

"You're insane, Pruelle. What on earth are you talking about!"

"I'm not the insane one, perhaps it's you, Father. Have you forgotten that I recently visited the west? Thinking of what I saw there, I still find it hard to hide my sorrow at how you've become this way."

At the sight of his smiling son, the Duke's heart raced wildly. For the first time, he realized that his children were not the small, insignificant creatures he had perceived them to be.

A son who had grown taller than his father, and a daughter who had learned to give a chilling stare.

All that he thought he knew was overturned in an instant, and cold sweat ran down his back. The Duke breathed heavily, clutching his chest.

Then, the sound of knocking came again. Without waiting for an answer, those who entered were the Emperor's direct guards, who had not left the Sun Palace for years. Following them were others in unfamiliar black uniforms.

Unlike the bewildered Duke, the others merely looked at the intruders with indifferent faces, as if they had known all along that they would come.

"Your Highness, Duke Tain. This is the imperial edict sent by His Majesty the Emperor."

Duke Tain had unfolded the paper with trembling hands.

Contained within was a brief and succinct command that read: "Information has been obtained that an Awakener from the southern countries, seeking to disturb the Empire, have conspired with Duke Tain. As we intend to send a Cavalry member possessing the authority to investigate matters related to the Awakener, do not obstruct them."

The time for executing the command was specified as the moment Duke Tain had confirmed it.

"Awakener? Who on earth is this Awakener?"

"If you have verified it, I will accept the command."

As the Duke's mumbling fell, the Imperial Guards quickly bowed, gesturing towards the men dressed in black uniforms.

"Your Highness, Duke Tain. I am Deputy Commander Steiber Rendley of the Cavalry. From now on, I will receive the orders of His Majesty the Emperor and the Commander and momentarily escort your honorable personage. Please forgive the intrusion."

A middle-aged man who was smiling kindly stepped forward and greeted him.

"I did not permit this. Who exactly is the Awakener, and who is investigating me? Stop these guys right now, Theorado! Theo!"

The Duke's voice, calling Theorado's name frantically, echoed and dispersed throughout the vast mansion.

But there was no one who came running to his aid.

...

"Have you finished all the investigations?"

"Yeah. As expected, there wasn't much valuable information, so it ended quickly."

Yuder looked at Kishiar's face, who had returned from the security management team sooner than expected. The day after everything was overturned, they had a busier day than anyone else.

While Kishiar had summoned and interrogated the nobles brought in by the security management team, Yuder had examined the laborers brought by the Star of Nagran and the southern merchants. The laborers had little information about the southern merchants, so the gains were scant, but the case with the Star of Nagran was slightly different.

It was a significant harvest, as they were able to properly confront Hosanna, the teleporter who had been troubling them for so long.

'Even though it was only in his sleeping form.'

Hosanna had been shocked to see the transformed appearance of Finn Eldore, who had secretly sneaked into the bed in place of Graham Willhem, whom he tried to kill, and had fallen in a faint. It

was good that he was easily subdued in the opportunity, but the sleeping potion that Finn had drugged him with had been too much, and he was still unconscious.

Chapter 426

"The fact that his condition has worsened due to using his ability many times in a short time to fight Nathan Zuckerman alone must have also contributed to his long fainting."

After examining Hosanna with Lusan and Enon, Yuder determined that it seemed Hosanna would have difficulty using his abilities properly for some time. Teleportation ability was notoriously tricky to use compared to others, and it was a natural consequence since he had recklessly used such an ability beyond what his body could handle.

Nevertheless, in case he woke up and attempted to escape, Yuder asked that those guarding Hosanna's side must tie his wrist together with theirs using a rope.

Based on what he had seen and heard so far, Hosanna needed close contact with others to use his teleportation ability. And judging by the tendencies of teleportation ability users Yuder had met in his previous life, this meant that those in contact with Hosanna when he used his ability were highly likely to move along with him, even without the user's consent.

Teleportation ability users generally said that the power required increased exponentially as the number of people being transported and the distance grew.

No matter how extraordinary and rare Hosanna's ability was at this time, it would be impossible to attempt to escape to a distant place while connected to someone else.

"It would be great if Kanna could find a better way... but this is the best we can do for now."

In his previous life, mages commissioned by Emperor Katchian had succeeded in altering the structure of the Knight-suppression device and the Mage-suppression device to create an Awakener-suppression device. It had happened not long after Emperor Katchian had started giving Yuder secret missions.

Though it didn't work well on Yuder for the test, making the Emperor dissatisfied with the result, he had heard that the original suppression devices were almost ineffective against very strong individuals. Nevertheless, having such a device would have been helpful in suppressing without straining the body in a situation like this.

‘Why didn't I pay more attention to how and who made it back then?’

The regret was not only about that. Although most of this incident had gone as planned, there were still overlooked aspects.

Whether it was Nathan Zuckerman's emitted swordmaster aura, making Nahan fall from the third floor and yet successfully escape, the southern merchants whose hidden intentions seemed not so good, or the innocent people and property damage during the process, they all contributed to a reason why he couldn't simply feel relieved by the success in catching Duke Tain and Baron Willhem.

"And... this kind of thing will continue."

The southern merchants and Nahan were all people who existed in his previous life. The fact that they had started to show different behaviors was probably because the Cavalry and Yuder had changed first, and thus met them.

The small changes that occurred from just one person's transformation were gradually extending and connecting to places beyond his knowledge.

There might be more things happening now that did not occur back then. To prepare for that, he needed to understand and act upon more possibilities.

Faster than before. In a way different from up to now...

"What are you thinking about so much?"

At that moment, Kishiar, who had taken off his coat, gently asked. His eyes scanned Yuder's eyelashes, which had just fluttered away from his deep thoughts.

"I was just thinking about this incident for a moment."

"I heard the news that someone spread a rumor today that we had been in the lounge all night during the party. Could it be about that?"

At the unexpected question, Yuder was momentarily unable to respond quickly.

Before going to see the members of the Star of Nagran today, Yuder had carried out the task of nailing upside down on the gate of Baron Willhem's mansion the knight who had maliciously expelled Kanna.

That man had shouted that rumor loudly and furiously at that time, but Yuder had long since pushed it out of his mind, not caring about it in the slightest, as he naturally did not find those words unpleasant.

"No, it's not that. But how did you know?"

Kishiar had surely gone to the security management team much earlier than Yuder, so it was puzzling how he knew about the trivial event that had occurred here today.

"On my way here, I couldn't help but hear how diligently others were talking about it."

"I see."

"If not, so be it. So, what have you been thinking about, Assistant?"

Yuder blinked several times and answered slowly.

"Just what kind of response we should prepare if such a task arises again... I was just thinking about such things for a moment."

"Interesting. I'd like to hear what response you think is necessary."

"It wasn't anything extraordinary."

"If it's not extraordinary, then you can talk about it more comfortably, right?"

Kishiar's articulate way of expressing his desire to achieve something was indeed very characteristic of him.

'Anyway, these were things I was going to propose to Kishiar once I organized my thoughts, so it doesn't really matter if I do it now.'

Yuder let out a small sigh and opened his mouth.

"Commander, what do you think about possibly creating a branch of the Cavalry?"

"A branch?"

"Yes. I've heard that the larger knight orders create regional branches. If there were regional branches within the Cavalry, wouldn't we be able to identify and help those in trouble, like the Star of Nagran we met this time, who had to flee their hometown?"

He spoke as if it was just an idea, but it was something he had actually done in his previous life.

In his previous life, Kishiar had left some western-born members behind for cleanup after the western incident was almost settled. Before stepping down from his position as Commander, he had promoted the place to the first Cavalry branch, which became the prototype for many branches that later spread like a spider's web throughout the country.

The Cavalry's early possession of national Awakener management, which was the envy of other countries, was due in part to the flawless branch system that Kishiar had originally created.

Perhaps the current Kishiar was already thinking of creating such branches.

Yuder slowly rubbed his lips and stared at the man's face, lost in thought.

Soon, the awaited answer flowed from Kishiar's mouth.

"It's interesting. In fact, I had thought about making something similar since I created the Cavalry. No, originally, I had intended to recruit regionally."

"Is that so?"

The fact that even the Assistant didn't know surprised Kishiar, who wore a bitter yet playful smile.

"Yes. But I kept running into opposition and couldn't achieve my goal. Eventually, I had to agree to a compromise to establish a small unit in the capital first, show its performance, and then negotiate again. I also couldn't completely control the recruitment process."

"I didn't know."

Yuder's entry exam into the cavalry was a part of that, with Kishiar disguised and accompanying as an examiner only in the second round. His face, telling that it wasn't merely a scheme to observe people more comfortably by pretending not to be the Commander, briefly showed some old emotions before they disappeared.

"But now, we might be able to renegotiate. Originally, I had planned to return to the capital and expedite the second phase of recruitment by initiating regional enlistment, but perhaps, as my assistant suggested, it might be good to establish a branch here first."

"Is that really so?"

Kishiar's decision had come surprisingly quickly, considering that Yuder had thought there would be time to contemplate the suggestion. Furthermore, Kishiar even considered moving up the second phase of recruitment. Yuder stammered a question, to which Kishiar nodded.

"Since we're discussing this, shall we start immediately tomorrow? It might be far better to create a branch and leave them behind to investigate the ones we've arrested here, such as the Star of Nagran and others, instead of taking them to the capital. It's true for them and us alike. Ah, of course, we must take Hosanna with us."

"Where do you think we should place it?"

"The head of the security management team, the Tainu Knights' Commander, will be vacating his place soon. The temporary headquarters are there, so there's no need to prepare from scratch. It's perfect. In these matters, being the first is crucial."

Kishiar said, smiling brightly. Commander Jeymer Phil, who had seen the Cavalry as a thorn in his side for years, was about to be dismissed and stand trial soon. Many of his crimes, committed under the command of Baron Willhem over the years, had been exposed.

"It looks good, but... Wouldn't people in the West be against it?"

"The last person I met today was Lord Koelt. When I subtly asked him, he seemed to think that he wouldn't refuse the return to the family that governs Tainu."

Public opinion can easily change depending on who's in charge. While the Willhem family was in power, those who agreed with them prospered, but if the Koelt family took charge, those who had been silent would surely come forward with their opinions.

"That's fortunate."

"It is. If so, we might be able to return sooner than planned..."

Kishiar, with a joyful face, was about to further explain the plan when he suddenly turned his head towards the window. Small birds flying from the darkness tapped on the window with their beaks, announcing their presence.

"Messages from the capital."

A man opened the door, and the birds perched on his fingers as he returned. One of the birds was quite familiar to Yuder's eyes. It was sent from the cavalry.

After making the birds chirping for water sit near the cup, Kishiar took out the letters. After several steps, he broke the seals and quickly read the content. His face, serene as he read the letter from the Cavalry, changed instantly as he read the second one.

"Commander?"

"It appears that we must not merely return sooner, but absolutely must do so."

"What happened?"

Kishiar's eyes, holding the letter in his hand, darkened immeasurably.

"His Majesty has collapsed."

Chapter 427

"Does His Majesty the Emperor... speak?"

"Yes. It seems he suddenly collapsed due to a chronic illness and only opened his eyes after half a day."

A complex emotion flickered in Yuder's eyes. The feeling was that the time had come, as only a few months were left until Emperor Keilusa's departure from the world in his previous life, due to the worsening of his chronic illness.

But on the other hand, he was not pleased. Even Gakane who would have died in the west if things had been the same as before, and all the other Cavalry members, were alive and well in this life. Despite so much change, could the death of Emperor Keilusa be the only thing that remained unchanged?

'If the death had been caused by an assassination attempt or another factor that could have been resolved in advance, it would have already been resolved.'

"...That's what will be announced to the public, but it's a bit different for those who know the situation."

Yuder, who had been lost in thought, raised his eyes that were cast downward due to Kishiar's sudden reversal of his previous statement.

"Yes?"

"Do you remember me saying that His Majesty's chronic illness is similar to the reason why I had no choice but to be known as a sick person to the outside world until I became an Awakener?"

Did he remember the conversation they had before? The red pupils calmly asked. Yuder, looking into those eyes, suddenly opened his mouth to a speculation that had briefly crossed his mind.

“Could it be that His Majesty the Emperor's condition has worsened...?”

“...I can't know. Not yet.”

Emperor Keilusa was heading towards his end day by day due to the vessel problem, just like Kishiar had before. Kishiar had supported Thais Yulman's research, hoping that the power of the Red Stone would help the Emperor, but he had not yet heard any other news about it.

Was it possible that the news of his collapse was not bad?

Kishiar looked down at the letter once again. A deep and unfathomable shadow lingered on his face, from which his usual armor-like smile had vanished.

“I think I'll have to have a drink and go to sleep tonight. Will you join me and listen?”

Yuder thought he had seen various sides of Kishiar, but this expression was a first. After a moment of hesitation, he cautiously replied.

“Could I listen?”

“Of course. There's no conversation that an assistant shouldn't hear. If it's burdensome to stay by my side, you can leave.”

“That's not the case.”

Kishiar's eyes finally twinkled at the firm denial.

“...All right. Then listen to my stories and be my drinking partner as well.”

He promptly called for a servant to bring the wine. Only a heavy silence flowed between the two until the bottle and glasses arrived. Kishiar poured the transparent strong liquor into the glass

himself, gulped it all down, and neatly set it aside. To an unknowing eye, it would not have seemed strange to mistake the drink for water.

The only sign that revealed he had drunk a painful, potent liquor was his eyes, which began to flicker like a lampshade that had just blocked a flame.

“Now, a glass for my assistant.”

Yuder swallowed the glass that Kishiar had poured for him as if it were water. In his case, it was really no different from water, but Kishiar laughed heartily.

“You didn't have to follow me. Is your stomach not hurting?”

“I'm fine.”

“Does this amount of alcohol fall within the range where my assistant doesn't get drunk?”

“...Yes.”

“Then it's good.”

The two drank several more glasses back and forth. Despite drinking from small glasses, they soon finished a bottle.

It was when Kishiar had opened the second bottle and taken the first sip that he began to speak.

"His Majesty has always been more robust than me. Many have said that you could live a long life if you didn't overexert yourself. But that His Majesty should come to this state is not a natural result of the power outgrowing the vessel, as happened to me."

Then why has it come to this now?

Kishiar, meeting Yuder's gaze, lifted the corners of his lips coolly.

"His Majesty and I think it's the nobles' trickery."

"You think...?"

"There's no remaining evidence, that's why."

"..."

"His Majesty originally knew that it was difficult to have a successor, so he was thinking of adopting one. He wanted to appoint a child, personally favored from the distant relatives of the imperial family, excluding the nobility, as the Crown Prince."

Kishiar paused for a moment before speaking again.

"But the nobles argued that it was unreasonable and that the most qualified person should be chosen through fair competition to gain everyone's approval."

And so, for the first time, an unprecedented situation arose where the position of Crown Prince was contested, with each noble family and the imperial family's relatives putting forth candidates. The Emperor finally consented only after securing a promise that no one would object if the Emperor's side's candidate won.

The candidates for the Crown Prince fought fiercely through several tests. The battles, bolstered by the strength of each family, sometimes escalated into life-threatening dangers.

Then, one day, during a hunting competition attended by all Crown Prince candidates, a serious carriage overturning accident occurred.

"It was clearly an accident targeting the candidate chosen by His Majesty. But the incident escalated as even His Majesty's carriage got caught up in it."

Under normal circumstances, it would have been a fatal accident. But the Emperor, in a desperate moment, exerted all his power for the first time to save himself and the Empress. As a result, both survived unscathed, but the candidate that Emperor Keilusa had wanted to adopt as his heir died.

And the Emperor's vessel also suffered damage.

"As you know, after that, the current Crown Prince and the Diarca family seized victory and took their place."

Those who caused the accident might not have known the ongoing vessel issue in the imperial family, but ultimately, they achieved great success since the Emperor became confined and unable to go outside.

"I was in Peletta at the time, so I didn't fully understand the situation. Only after I became an Awakener and healed did I learn the strange reason His Majesty was confined, citing a strange disease."

The Emperor's not being able to work outside was almost impossible, yet there was no other way. Now that Katchian, the candidate from the Diarca family, had become Crown Prince, even inside the imperial palace, they couldn't be careless.

At that time, Kishiar, having become an Awakener and appearing healthy, was like a lost hope returning to them.

"I told you before. Just as the power of the Red Stone saved me, I thought it could also help His Majesty's vessel. In a way, the rapid changes in the world due to the presence of Awakeners could be a good opportunity."

Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar, while protecting and investigating the Red Stone, dreamed once again of achieving their goals in a changing world.

"Do you remember the magic stones medium, with power separated from the Red Stone, that Thais Yulman had created? I handed them over to His Majesty."

As close as one was to the power of the Red Stone, and the more one was exposed to it, the higher the likelihood of becoming an Awakener. Thus, it was necessary to create an environment where the same miracle could happen to Emperor Keilusa. Therefore, he had requested that most of the stone, except for the amount needed for research, be placed in the Emperor's room and never be kept far away.

What returned even before a proper result could be confirmed was a letter reporting that the Emperor had collapsed.

"... His Majesty has an incredibly strong patience. Even amid the immense pain of the gradually crumbling vessel."

Did this mean that a limit was approaching, now that he had collapsed?

Kishiar drank another glass of liquor, his face solemn.

"The likelihood that the gift I sent didn't take effect is high... But just because he has collapsed once doesn't mean everything is over yet. Although my heart is heavy, I want to think that way until I return and check it myself."

Silence flowed once more. Yuder looked down at the liquor before him and slowly opened his mouth.

"Commander, you've gone through the same process as His Majesty."

Kishiar's hand paused.

"...Yes. I did."

"How much time do you think is left then, in your view?"

It was a frank and bold question. But there was no cleverness in Yuder to ask it indirectly.

Chapter 428

Kishiar had once said that it took around five years to determine that the vessel had reached its limits after sustaining damage. Emperor Keilusa had predicted a shorter time, and although he had eventually collapsed, it wasn't the end of everything.

Kishiar tilted his head, staring into a pair of deep, dark eyes that looked straight ahead.

"Is something on your mind?"

"It's difficult to say for sure at the moment. However, if there's still time, I'd like to find a way."

Kishiar wasn't fond of uncertainty, but this time he had no choice.

The man who could easily laugh and talk when discussing the secrets he himself hid was now not smiling at all. News about one's only family obviously held a different weight, even for a man who wouldn't blink in the face of ordinary calamities.

Just moments ago, Yuder had considered simply letting Emperor Keilusa die, but from the moment he realized this, he changed his mind.

Kishiar hadn't changed his belief that the power of the Red Stone could solve the issue with the vessel. In that case, Yuder couldn't give up on this matter either.

'I don't know the progress on the research into the power of the Red Stone, but there have been significant developments related to it for me. If the power of the Red Stone can help... maybe there's a chance I can intervene.'

Noticing the change in Yuder's eyes, Kishiar's expression also subtly altered. Words were unnecessary as countless meanings came and went in the locked gaze they shared.

"You're thinking of something dangerous, aren't you?"

"Isn't it a situation where you have to find any means necessary?"

"The reason I brought this up wasn't to rope in assistance."

"Then it's already too late."

Yuder answered quietly, yet resolutely.

"So, how much time do you think we have left?"

"..."

A long breath escaped between Kishiar's parted lips. He looked like a man at a loss for words. Yet his gaze was still fixed on Yuder as if entranced, eventually giving way to a thin, uncontrollable laughter.

What he was laughing about, Yuder couldn't tell, but he stubbornly waited for an answer.

Finally, a clear voice responded.

"If the damage to the vessel has reached its limit and convulsions and fainting begin, the one who lasted the longest among the precedents managed to endure for about six months."

Six months. About half a year from now. Emperor Keilusa of a previous life seemed to have left the world before that time too. Yuder, recalling the memories, asked again.

"What was the shortest duration then?"

"They didn't last even a month."

Six months and less than a month. Both were less than a year, but the difference was substantial.

If the Red Stone's power-infused magic stone that Kishiar had sent to Emperor Keilusa indeed had no effect, and if Yuder could not find any method in the future, then he would die again within that period.

'I'm not sure how the variables will play out, but I guess I can assume that there's time until everything was originally supposed to end in the West.'

Yuder's mind began to turn rapidly. He threw another question to gather as much information as possible.

"Who was the person that endured for six months?"

Wondering if there might have been some special reason why the one who endured longer could do so, Yuder asked, and a perplexed smile floated across Kishiar's face.

"Hmm, to tell the truth, it's me."

"You?"

"After enduring about 6 months, I sensed the end and became like this, so it might be hard to consider it a proper count."

"..."

Kishiar was the one who had endured the pain for the longest time.

A feeling of indescribable frustration found its way into Yuder's heart at that moment.

In his previous life, he would have experienced this pain not once, but twice. It was entirely unimaginable since there had never been a single instance where he had fainted or had a seizure, but that must have been the case.

He could not even slightly understand what state of mind that would require, and it stirred up an unknown turbulent wave within Yuder's heart.

"You don't need to worry about it now," Kishiar said, reaching out and tousling Yuder's bangs, interpreting Yuder's pale, expressionless face. Yuder closed his eyes at the touch and then opened them, regaining control of his emotions.

'...Right.'

It hasn't happened now.

So it was right to think of more important things first.

"So, now that you have the answer, will you tell me what dangerous thoughts my assistant is having?"

"Before coming to the west, didn't I see and touch the energy inside your body, Commander?"

Not merely touching, he had also eliminated some of the tangled forces within. Afterwards, Kishiar unintentionally received the fortune of the impending 'cycle' and heat period suddenly receding.

Although the same thing had not happened since, Yuder had been able to discern more about the powers absorbed into his body as he went through various incidents in the west.

These experiences gave him some confidence in what he was about to say.

"If you permit me, I intend to try to cause the same thing to happen again."

"..."

Kishiar did not respond immediately.

After a long silence, his eyes, which had been scanning Yuder's face, finally went down to the hand covered in gloves.

"That... I remember we decided not to try again until we knew more about what happened that time. Didn't we? Do you now have confidence to intentionally cause that again?"

"No."

"Then?"

"It's difficult to assure you with certainty, but it's different from that time. The moment when I completely expelled the toxicity remaining in the body, I felt that perhaps I could accomplish the same thing again."

He remembered the feeling when the activated power boiled like flames and something remaining in his body was burning vividly after taking the medicine made by Enon. He had never before experienced something so faint becoming so clear.

If he could grasp and bring it out again.

Yuder explained the sensations he had felt and his assumptions about the change in power as positively as possible. Kishiar listened quietly in silence.

A while later, his answer was not entirely negative.

"If it's as you say, you might be able to achieve good results."

"Then..."

"But it's still difficult to be sure that the same result as my time will come, even if the same thing happens again. A single attempt can go wrong, or you might get hurt."

He knew that. But wasn't it better than not trying at all? He was about to say just that when—

"...So let me test it first."

"Yes?"

At the unexpected words, he questioned, and Kishiar calmly replied.

"I was in a condition similar to His Majesty's, and to some extent, it's still true. Therefore, if you first try it on me and succeed again, the chances of failure will be reduced, won't they?"

It was a valid argument. If he could actually try the same thing again, there were also thoughts of dealing with Kishiar's vessel problem.

But strangely enough, the acceptance did not come easily as he looked at Kishiar's face, confidently telling him to practice on him without hesitation. The man who saw Yuder's hesitation gave a sweet smile and shook his head.

"Did you propose a method you're not even confident to try? If that's the case, I can't accept it."

"...No. If you cooperate, of course, I will try it."

"Good, I like that."

Kishiar put down his half-empty glass of alcohol.

"First, this letter was sent by someone other than His Majesty for situation reporting, so I plan to wait for the next letter from His Majesty and then decide when to move. When will you start the trial?"

"It's difficult right now. After I understand it a bit more... Would it be alright to tell you around tomorrow night?"

"That's fine."

Kishiar's expression was fresh, but on the contrary, Yuder felt a slight weight on his shoulders. He had another drink of alcohol instead of water, and then glanced at the two letters in front of Kishiar. He knew all the contents of the letter from the imperial palace, but he didn't yet know what news was in the letter from the Cavalry.

"By the way, what was the content of the letter from the Cavalry?"

"Ah, this one? It's a report that the capital is in an uproar because Duke Tain has been summoned for investigation related to this incident. The gambling houses he frequented also seem to have closed down one after another thanks to this."

"It has spread that far already."

"It's the result of many people working hard there."

How many people must have worked behind the scenes for this result? Yuder thought of the Cavalry members who would have been sweating in the capital and the Great Sarain Forest, and Pruelle, who might be finishing up in the capital and returning by now.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door and called for Kishiar.

"Commander, are you there? There's an urgent contact from the security management team."

Chapter 429

"What's going on?"

As soon as he got permission, Emun opened the door and stepped inside, pausing for a moment when he saw the alcohol placed in front of Kishiar and Yuder. But he quickly averted his eyes and spoke his purpose.

"Ever has requested you to come to the underground dungeon's 4th floor immediately. She said you would understand if she just said that much..."

"Understood. Prepare the carriage and tell Kanna to come. You can fill Kanna's place for a while."

After Emun hurriedly left, Kishiar stood up, his face showing no sign of intoxication. Yuder got up and followed him, asking curiously.

"The 4th floor of the dungeon, you say? Is there a reason to call Kanna as well?"

"We'll talk about it on the way."

Kanna, who had been observing the Star of Nagran Awakeners, quickly joined them and got into the carriage. She too wore a puzzled expression, not knowing why she had been summoned.

During the swift journey through the darkness, Kishiar finally explained to the two who were in the dark.

"While investigating the nobles today, I requested a bit of cooperation from Baron Koelt. It seems that the Koelt family still has information about the underground dungeon's 4th floor."

Once upon a time, the current Baron Koelt, who had done much in the name of Duke Tain and was almost as famous as the Willhem family, still possessed much valuable information.

Although he had fallen from grace, he was a well-known historian. He showed great interest in the story of the 4th floor of the dungeon that Kishiar subtly brought up. He had heard it as an old tale from his grandfather but never expected it to exist.

He was also from the Duke of Tain's family, so he was fully qualified to open the 4th floor of the dungeon. There could be no better person to investigate than the new caretaker of the West.

"So I ordered him to head to the underground dungeon's 4th floor with Ever as soon as the investigation ended. If they found anything inside, I told them to send word, but they sent someone quicker than I thought."

Through Kishiar's explanation, Kanna, who seemed quite interested in the new Baron even before meeting him, found out that he was also the informant who had secretly passed information to Pruelle, the one who stayed with Kishiar until the end of the party to protect him.

"I don't know either Tain's 1st Duke or him, but I've seen their names often in the information I've read since coming here. I wonder what they found there."

"We'll find out soon."

The front of the security management team building was bright as day, with many lights lit. While Kishiar was finding him and conversing with the startled members that there was no big problem and they should continue with their work, Kanna, who had been by Yuder's side, suddenly spoke with a hesitant face.

"Yuder. Do you, by chance, have any concerns?"

"No. Why?"

"Just from the carriage... I felt you were more than usual. If you don't want to answer, you can ignore it."

Though he did feel down due to news of Emperor Keilusa and the trial with Kishiar that he must attempt tomorrow, he had not intended to show it. But it seemed to have been futile before Kanna's greatly enhanced abilities.

Yuder glanced at Kanna's kind blue eyes, which seemed to worry whether he might be upset, and shook his head slightly.

"It's okay. Thank you."

"Mmm. But if you ever need my help, you know you can ask, right?"

Kishiar and the condition of the Emperor's body were confidential, making it genuinely difficult to ask for help, but the sincerity Kanna felt from Yuder lightened his mood somewhat.

They began to descend towards the third floor of the underground dungeon. The wide dungeon was packed with prisoners, and the cacophony from their individual wailing was almost unbearable.

Fortunately, the third floor, which confined serious criminals, was much quieter. Of course, that was until they discovered two people separated and imprisoned in cells with barred partitions.

"How dare you betray me! Without your nonsense, I wouldn't have been trapped here!"

"Is it only to that extent that you've gone mad, brother? I will not forget what a heinous act you committed, and I will report it in detail to Duke Tain, so please know that!"

"Do you think Duke Tain will believe your words?"

"Silence. The Duke's trust was more with me. He even bestowed this brooch upon me and trusts me over you, a mere Baron. How dare you doubt his intentions?"

"You're making a fuss over just a brooch? How many times has he lamented your stupidity to me and asked me to monitor your handling of matters...!"

Kanna, upon seeing Baron Willhem and his sibling squabbling incessantly inside the bars, tightened her facial muscles and bit her lips.

"Um, hmm. You seem very busy."

"It's more accurate to say they're busy with their mouths. Let's move on; it's too noisy."

Kishiar smoothly replied, turning away from the scene. Beyond the iron bars, the two disheveled men who had clawed at each other several times drifted further away.

"Commander, you've arrived."

"I greet you, Your Grace."

At the end of the third floor of the underground dungeon, where the hidden entrance to the fourth floor existed, Ever and Baron Koelt awaited, expressing both joy and tension as they greeted them. Yuder exchanged brief eye contact with Ever and then observed Baron Koelt talking with Kishiar, suddenly taken aback.

"That person is...?"

He had heard stories since yesterday, but this was the first time he had seen his face. A vague memory from a previous life surfaced as soon as he saw him.

'Yes, I'm sure. He was the one who almost uniquely showed kindness during the Western mission.'

In the collapsing Western region, where even Baron Willhem of Tainu fled, a barren place where no one welcomed or helped the Cavalry, there was a man who happened to meet them and showed kindness.

He was leading several people in flight, and Yuder was heading into the village they had fled from to subdue monsters. Unlike others who avoided the Cavalry, the man had provided a suitable place to rest and shared information about the terrain, then departed.

And what Yuder found after clearing the monsters occupying the village was the man's party, annihilated by another swarm of monsters not far from their first meeting place.

'Back then, he looked so miserable that I never thought he could be a noble.'

Their brief encounter lasted just a few minutes, and Yuder had assumed the man to be merely a village chief leading his people from danger. The realization that the man was a Baron, and that they would meet again in this way, was even more astonishing.

Yuder resolved to believe in his humanity even more firmly and quickly than when Kishiar had taken an interest in Baron Koelt and told him his story.

"What did you discover that you contacted us so urgently, Baron Koelt?"

"I believe I've found a clue that can shed light on the actual purpose and history of the fourth floor of the prison, so I took the liberty of contacting you. It would be easier for you to understand if you go down and see it for yourself."

Unlike in his previous life, the perfectly healthy Baron Koelt was a person who felt very scholarly, with a neat and upright impression. Through his glasses, his eyes shone, and from his flawless posture, a rigid character was clearly felt.

In front of Kishiar, he did not overly humble himself; conversely, he did not act as if he was higher in front of Ever, Yuder, or Kanna either.

"Alright. Let's go down."

As soon as Kishiar nodded his head, Baron Koelt stood in front of a wall engraved with Tain Duchy's insignia and placed his palm against it. Thanks to the still-unhealed wound from a previous cut, the floor and wall soon shifted, revealing the way down to the fourth floor.

'That place...'

As everyone naturally followed the moving staircase down, the door closed behind them. Ever, holding a lantern, led the way.

“It looks... different from the upper floors.”

Finally stepping onto the fourth floor, Kanna looked around and muttered softly. Indeed, the fourth floor of the prison looked similar to the upper floors but was somehow different. First, the bars covering the cells were not black iron but white stone, and the ceiling was much lower.

Inside each cell on the floor, there was a large magic circle, aged and mysterious. This was evidently where the victims of human trafficking had been held.

‘They said they could almost live without eating or drinking in there...’

“There's an empty space ahead. It looks like nothing is there, but I searched around, thinking that there must be something.”

Baron Koelt opened his mouth in a serious tone.

“And I discovered an insignia on one wall, similar to the entrance above. When I smeared blood on it...”

As he spoke, the previously empty space revealed itself just as he had described. Only now, one wall had opened, and another space inside had newly exposed itself.

“A researcher's lab has been revealed.”

“A research lab?”

“Yes. It's definitely an old mage's research lab.”

Chapter 430

If there were anyone worthy of being the owner of this laboratory, it would likely be the first Duke Tain.

According to what Pruelle and Kishiar had shared earlier, the first Duke Tain was a disciple of Archmage Luma, just like his brothers. Luma often visited him in Tainu, and even though he might not have recognized his disciple's talent, he had acknowledged his research abilities.

There were also speculations about his research content, which was now unknown. Even though its nature was not clear, it was presumed dangerous, so it was thought to have been hidden.

However, even after the existence of the fourth floor was revealed, no such space was found inside.

Since saving those trapped there and capturing Baron Willhem had been the priority, Yuder had postponed thoughts about this particular matter.

Had the time finally come to verify the answer?

As Yuder's gaze surreptitiously shifted toward Kishiar, Kishiar, too, looked back at him with a significant expression. From a small nod, it was felt that they were thinking the same thing.

They finally entered the opened laboratory.

And they encountered an unexpected sight.

'...Just discarded bags? Where is anything that would suggest a laboratory?'

The place was not very spacious. The walls inside, carved out like a dark cave, were filled with various patterns, but that was all. On the otherwise empty floor, old worn-out cloth bags were scattered about.

What, then, had made him decide this was a mage's laboratory?

Crouched down and casually picking up one of the bags, Kanna opened her mouth as if she had realized something.

"This is... recent garbage. Originally, something was inside, and it was brought here and discarded."

"Did you use your ability just now?" Baron Koelt asked in astonishment.

"Yes. Reading this kind of information is my power."

"Remarkable. I would like to hear more if it weren't for the current situation... Anyway, there's no need to worry about these. They are presumed to be the trash that Baron Willhem left behind. What's important is over here."

With a scholar's curiosity, Baron Koelt quickly refocused and pointed to the full wall of patterns.

"Would you like to figure out what it is?"

"Symbols for tactical game cards," Kishiar answered quietly as soon as he entered, having been staring at the wall.

"Correct. These are symbols representing each card. In the very old days, the cards were not made in standardized forms as they are now. Any material marked with those symbols became that card. According to stories passed down in my family, the first Duke Tain enjoyed this very much."

Only then did the patterns on the wall become familiar to Yuder. Although adorned with many decorative elements, they were indeed in almost the same form as the symbols carved on the underside of the tactical game cards.

After scanning all of them, Yuder noticed something strange.

"The game uses a total of 24 cards. The symbols drawn here are also 24, the same. But why are the numbers of types slightly different?"

Tactical games used 24 cards of 8 types. The most numerous common cards, 'Yung,' were 10, followed by five different cards with 2 to 3 each, and two cards controlling the game representing the ruler.

However, the symbols on the wall diverged slightly from these established rules. Some types were represented by four cards, while others had just one.

"Baron Willhem likely discovered this place but probably didn't think much of these symbols, using it merely as a secret storage. Those who might have known about this place before also seemed not to have delved deeply into this particular aspect."

However, Baron Koelt, who had a deep interest in history and had been conducting research, recognized it as an old military cipher at a glance.

"It's a code used a long time ago. If you decipher it, it means, 'Return the king in his entirety,'" he said.

"Here, there's only one piece of the king's card 'Imum.' But when only one piece of the priest's card 'Shen' remains, it can temporarily become Imum."

"That's right. And here, there are only two of the priest's cards drawn instead of the original three. So when one of them was covered like this..."

Baron Koelt agreed with Kishiar's words and covered one of the symbols with his hand. At that moment, the symbols, filled with the blood from a wound on his hand, emitted light, and the inside, which had appeared empty like a storeroom, suddenly vibrated without a sound.

Yuder reflexively kept an eye on the surroundings, worrying that Kishiar or others might be in danger.

Moments later, facilities that had not existed just before appeared before their eyes.

Piles of paper that had been written on and drawn on countless times, a title-less book, a dried-up pen, and various other tools were revealed. Kanna let out a soft voice, saying,

"My goodness. It's a real mage's laboratory."

"You wouldn't believe how surprised I was when I saw it briefly earlier," Ever murmured, just before Kishiar, who had stepped forward, picked up the closest book.

"Is this a diary? It's written in a jumble of Gore script." (a constructed language)

"Yes, it's clear that a mage wrote this. The original owner might have been the first Duke of Tain, although I can't confirm it as we haven't read it all."

Baron Koelt was aware that the first Duke of Tain had been a mage. Being fluent in Gore, he easily interpreted the text.

"Most of it is about research. I also discovered that studies on monsters were conducted here."

"Monsters?"

"The majority of these piled papers contain drawings that describe observed monsters. It seems like captured monsters were likely kept and studied in this dungeon."

"Interesting."

Glancing at the heap of rolled-up papers, Kishiar nodded. The dungeon's secret was finally being uncovered.

'Studying monsters is still a controversial topic, so it makes sense that such research would be hidden during that time.'

Enon had mentioned that the Archmage Luma had been secretly researching ways to manipulate time. If the one who conducted research on monsters here was the first Duke of Tain, it seemed unlikely that there was any connection between the two.

It was slightly disappointing, as Yuder had hoped to learn more about Luma's research.

'For now, I'll have to inform Enon...'

"What was the purpose of this research, according to the text?"

Kishiar, who had been flipping through the diary, then asked.

"If someone went to the lengths of keeping it a secret, they must have had a particular goal in mind."

"Well, there was a section that could be speculated upon, but it seemed rather absurd to me, so..."

Baron Koelt didn't continue, thinking that he might have misinterpreted the text. At that, Kishiar requested to see the specific page. The Baron handed the book to Kishiar, who opened it to the designated page.

"This is the section I'm referring to."

Although the hastily written words mixed with Gore rendered the page unreadable for Yuder, Kishiar scanned through it with a calm and swift gaze.

"If we can discover the origins of these accursed beings, time that does not flow backward may also become an ally. Do you not harbor the same question and wish? When I asked this, my spiritual father gave no reply.' Is this the section you mean?"

"Yes, that's about as much as I could interpret as the objective of the research."

Baron Koelt, unable to suppress his admiration, responded to Kishiar's smooth reading of the Gore text.

"It certainly is somewhat absurd, as you say. What do you think, my assistant... Yuder?"

Turning his head as usual to inquire about his assistant's opinion, Kishiar called out the name with a strange look in his eyes. Until that moment, no one had paid any attention to the dark-haired man standing behind Kishiar, but now all eyes were fixed on him.

"...Yes?"

Yuder finally snapped back to reality and responded. At a glance, his face seemed unchanged, but Kishiar alone discerned a slight tremor in his gaze.

"How does this discussion appear to you, assistant?"

"...I don't know much about magic, so it's difficult for me to comment."

"I see, very well."

Kishiar closed the journal he was holding.

"Kanna, what kind of information have you been able to gather here?"

"So far, I haven't found anything noteworthy. This place was hidden by magic for so long, that's probably why."

Kanna shook her head, clearly disappointed.

"I see. Then, Baron Koelt, we will be busy going forward, but you're the only one I can entrust with keeping an eye on this place. Would it be all right if I take this journal first for further examination? I find it personally intriguing."

"Of course. I'd be honored. As a scholar, it's something I've wanted to ask for myself. If I find any new information from the objects here, I'll let you know."