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Leaving behind Baron Koelt, who appeared more lively than ever, Yuder followed Kishiar outside. Ever and Kanna were engrossed in a passionate conversation about the mysterious magic hidden within the mage's study, but hardly any of their words registered in Yuder's mind.

He responded in brief when directly questioned, preoccupied with contemplating the new information he'd gathered.

'I thought there was no connection between the research of the first Duke of Tain and that of Luma, but perhaps I was mistaken.'

The diary entries that Kishiar had deciphered were cryptic, difficult to immediately understand. However, terms like "the accursed beings" and "time" caught his attention distinctly.

'The "the accursed beings" must refer to the monsters he researched. If we can find out where these monsters came from, then time itself could become an ally... Is this not overly ominous?'

Both Baron Koelt and Kishiar found these ideas absurd, but Yuder couldn't bring himself to agree. He knew the kind of research Luma had conducted; he himself was someone who had genuinely traveled back in time.

If an Archmage like Luma had conducted research on something seemingly implausible, it meant he had reason to believe it was possible.

Had there been others before Yuder who had also traveled back in time?

Did Luma and the first Duke of Tain engage in their research concerning time because they had witnessed such an occurrence?

If their research had indeed made reversing time possible, what would Luma have intended to accomplish?

Yuder cast a fleeting glance at the worn book in Kishiar's hands.

He was immensely curious about its contents but could not think of a good excuse for someone of his ignorance to ask to see it.

'If only Enon were here, he could read it.'

As he pondered, Yuder met the gaze of Kishiar's red eyes, which had been watching him.

'...How long has he been watching me?'

Before Yuder could blink, Kishiar calmly initiated conversation.

"Are you interested in this diary? You've been staring at it."

Kishiar had looked at him the same way when Yuder had been too lost in thought to respond immediately after hearing the diary's contents.

Those eyes that seemed to penetrate the unknown, even when their owner had no concrete information, intrigued him.

Kishiar asked Yuder nothing, despite the many anomalies about him. Yet, that only made Kishiar all the more vigilant, unwilling to miss even the smallest fragment of information. It wasn't suspicion, per se. Underneath that scrutiny and patience was a complex web of enormous trust and fervent passion.

Even now, as he grappled with complicated feelings about Emperor Keilusa, Kishiar's focus remained steadfastly on Yuder.

Certain of this, Yuder quietly exhaled.

"No, I just found it fascinating for a moment."

"Is that so? If your interest grows, feel free to speak up."

This reply clearly signaled that Kishiar had noticed Yuder's peculiar reaction to the diary.

It was easy to say he was interested, but what followed wouldn't be as simple. Acting carelessly in front of a man so perceptive could unintentionally reveal secrets best left hidden.

'Secrets...'

Yuder knew the kind of danger and agony his secrets held. People like Enon, who had always seemed mysterious even before Yuder knew he wasn't human, would likely react differently if they discovered those secrets.

'If the reaction I receive is as absurd as the contents of a diary from a long-dead first Duke Tain, I would consider myself fortunate.'

Being labeled a liar was not new to him. Neither was being accused of cheating, nor bearing the brunt of unadulterated hatred.

But what about Kishiar?

Until recently, Yuder had been able to do his own thing, resting assured in the quiet trust Kishiar seemed to offer. Maintaining secrets and handling the corresponding responsibilities hadn't seemed all that difficult. Yuder had no doubt that whatever great endeavors Kishiar had in the future would render his own secrets irrelevant. In his past life, they were neither close friends nor bitter enemies, so Yuder felt no obligation to disclose anything.

But now, why did it feel so complicated?

'No, I already know why.'

It was because he knew that Kishiar had already opened every door for Yuder.

It was because Kishiar had said he would willingly endure all the pain he felt for Yuder's sake.

It was because, when Kishiar had embraced Yuder as he flew into the balcony, he smiled as if he had taken the whole world into his arms.

But knowing this also magnified the internal conflict that had been nurtured by indecision. It was a vague wavering Yuder had never felt before in his life. It was a sensation akin to the fear he felt the first time he realized he was powerless in the face of a monster.

Before boarding the carriage to return, Yuder looked around at the others and opened his mouth.

"Would it be possible for me to get off halfway?"

"Why?" Kishiar questioned.

"I remembered that there's a small monster I want to check on."

Though one of the main purposes was to meet Enon, it was also true that he had intended to see the creature called Pethuamet for tomorrow's plans. Kanna gave him a puzzled look at the sudden request, but Yuder couldn't explain.

Kishiar, who had been gazing at Yuder with a thoughtful expression, soon nodded to grant permission.

"Alright, go ahead."

After boarding the carriage, Kishiar briefly told Kanna about where Pethuamet was located and who had been observing the monster. Kanna was impressed by the medicine extracted from researching Pethuamet, which had played a crucial role in Yuder's recovery.

"So that's how it is. The letter I received was rather vague, so I wasn't sure what had happened. So, will the two of you be returning once this is over?"

"I can't say for certain. I've actually been considering postponing dealing with that monster due to this whole situation."

"Is that so?"

This was news to Yuder as well. He had assumed that they would take care of Pethuamet before leaving, once everything was settled.

"Hellem said finding a subject as useful for study as this is almost a miracle. It's unwise to leave any uncertainty that might cause issues in the future."

The way Kishiar looked at Yuder as he said 'issues' made it abundantly clear who he considered the subject to be.

It seemed Kishiar had started to think that even if Yuder was fully healed now, unforeseeable issues could arise at any moment. Having no counter-argument, Yuder remained silent.

"In that case, Commander, may I accompany Yuder as well?"

Kanna jumped in, her voice upbeat.

"I've almost finished all the work I had before coming here. I'd like to examine that monster after such a long time."

"Very well."

Kishiar readily agreed again. In the end, Yuder had to get off near the house where Mick and Hellem stayed, accompanied by Kanna.

"Ah, this is the place? It looks like such an ordinary house. No one would ever think that monster research happens here."

Leaving Kanna behind, who shared a similar sentiment to Yuder at some point, a knock on the door was promptly followed by it creaking open. Upon seeing Yuder, Mick Shuden immediately let his guard down, breaking into a wide smile and spreading his arms.

"Ah! The assistant! I heard you've recovered, but it's great to finally see you. What brings you here at this hour?"

"I apologize if I've interrupted your rest. I've come unexpectedly, but I'd like to see the monster for a moment."

"Rest? I was actually drinking with my grandmother and the pharmacist. Please come in. Who's the person behind you?"

"Her name is Kanna Wand. She's the Jung Division Deputy Commander of the Cavalry."

"Ah. I'm Mick Shuden. Nice to meet you."

Exchanging a light handshake with Kanna, Mick scanned her face briefly while smiling.

"Indeed... Someone at the rank of Deputy Commander does stand out."

"Is that so? Thank you for the compliment."

"It's not a compliment; it's the truth."

"You seem quite exceptional yourself, Mr. Mick."

Both Mick and Kanna seemed to feel something from each other the moment their hands met, but as their intentions didn't appear to be ill, Yuder silently moved past them and entered.

Just as Mick had mentioned, bottles of alcohol were littered across the table, where Enon had been sharing drinks with Hellem. On seeing Yuder, Enon's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"What now? Is something else wrong?"

"I've only come to see the monster."

Though it was difficult to mention any other objectives, Enon's eyes grew even more skeptical. Seeing this, Hellem greeted Yuder with a chuckle, holding her drink.

"It's been a while. You look healthy, and that's a relief."

"I apologize for the delay in expressing my gratitude."

"Oh, don't mention it. The real credit goes to our pharmacist here. Mick and I didn't provide much help."

At that moment, Kanna and Mick entered, momentarily halting their conversation.

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"Hello. You're the mage Hellem, right?"

"Yes, I am. And you are...?"

Yuder was about to introduce Kanna, but Mick spoke first, beating him to it.

"Grandmother, this is Ms. Kanna Wand. She's one of the Deputy Commanders of the Cavalry. You know she immediately referred to me as Mr. Mick right after shaking hands? Hahaha. Such impressive skills."

"What?"

"I'll bring more cups now that we have more people! And more booze!"

After completing his statement, Mick vanished, leaving Kanna to awkwardly open her mouth.

"Nice to meet you. As you just heard, my name is Kanna Wand."

She added that although she had the ability to read information through touch, her skill wasn't particularly extraordinary. It seemed she was a bit concerned that Hellem might be cautious around her from the outset.

However, Hellem chuckled warmly and shook her head.

"If recognizing that I don't like being called by my first name through just one touch isn't impressive, then what is? You're welcome here as someone serving my lord, so please feel comfortable."

"Thank you!"

Kanna promptly took a seat next to Yuder and exchanged a glance with Enon. The atmosphere seemed to naturally turn towards a drinking session, prompting Yuder to quickly speak.

"Where is the monster kept?"

"It's still over there. Shall we go see it right now?"

"Yes."

"Ah-ah, that won't do, Assistant! You promised me last time, remember? You have to try our famous imported liquor collection before leaving."

But before Yuder could stand, Mick rushed back in, arms laden with several bottles and new cups, effectively stalling Yuder's attempt.

"This is the 'Tears of a Star,' a 27-year-old liquor imported from the South! And this one is the 'Breath of Glacier,' a 50-year-old brew from Exita, the northern island where it's winter all year! When would you have another opportunity to try these rare drinks?"

"Wow, I've never heard of any of these."

"Exactly! Even the Emperor would find it difficult to sample these."

"You sure have a way with words."

Kanna responded, amused, as Mick proudly shook the bottles. Hellem chuckled as she drank, and nowhere was Yuder's reluctance to join in evident.

"..."

"Just give in. He won't let you go until you've had a few glasses."

Enon, whose eyes met Yuder's, muttered with a resigned expression. He seemed quite accustomed to such situations, clearly having been a participant in Mick's drinking parties more than once or twice.

"To good times!"

In the end, Yuder was roped into joining them for drinks. While he never expected to be drinking with such company, thanks to Mick's engaging conversation skills honed through years of trade, the atmosphere was surprisingly lively.

Initially, Mick dominated the conversation with unbelievable stories from his trading days in the northern territories. But as time wore on and Kanna started to get flushed from the alcohol, the Cavalry and Kishiar became the central topics.

Mick seemed to know quite a bit about the Cavalry but admitted he didn't know much about its individual members, voicing his intense curiosity. Hellem wasn't as talkative or outgoing as Mick, but she smiled easily and was more insightful than she appeared.

Yuder occasionally supplemented Kanna's stories about the Cavalry when additional explanations were needed. At first, he had no intention of joining the conversation, but it was hard to ignore Hellem and Mick's remarks about Kishiar in Peletta.

Hellem vividly remembered the moment when Kishiar became the new owner and Duke of Peletta, and how he had taken her to that barren land.

"Accompanied by a few knights for escort, just one attendant, Nathan, and myself, we arrived at a castle that looked as though it could crumble at any moment. It appeared as though it hadn't been cleaned in hundreds of years. There weren't even any servants, let alone chamberlains. I was so furious that I wanted to turn around and confront the situation right away, but the lord casually slept through it all, without even batting an eye. Even the malicious steward held his tongue in the face of such calmness."

"Wow. So even then, Sir Zuckerman had attended him."

Kanna, who had gradually become comfortable speaking with Hellem, looked amazed.

"Yes, I had never seen a child so diligent and adorable."

"Adorable, you say."

Recalling Nathan Zuckerman, who had long since become gruff and imposing, Kanna bit her lip and rolled her eyes. Hellem let out a chuckle, as though understanding why she reacted that way.

"Back then, the lord was just a young boy. He really was..."

Yuder thought of a teenage Kishiar that he didn't know.

While Hellem and Mick's stories were not detailed, Yuder could easily imagine Kishiar's appearance: a young man with an intimidatingly beautiful face who enchanted people while pretending to know nothing and often accomplished unbelievable feats.

Before he realized it, a significant amount of time had passed.

In that time, he had struck up a conversation with Mick, and Hellem had given him permission to address her more informally. Every time he remembered that this gentle elderly woman used to be the Chief of the Imperial Mage, Yuder felt a strange sense of discomfort.

Kanna was also engaging in a very lively conversation with the two, as if they had known each other for a long time.

"Grandmother Hellem, if Peletta is so cold, how about moving to the Cavalry? The Commander would probably like that... Ah, I almost forgot to mention, we currently have another mage staying in our unit."

"Really? Who is it?"

"It's Thais Yulman, from the Pearl Tower."

"Thais? He's with the Cavalry?"

While drinking what seemed to be her umpteenth glass of wine, Hellem paused and set down her glass. Her wrinkled eyes narrowed slightly behind her glasses.

"Do you know him?"

"Of course. Even when I was young and at the Pearl Tower, he was famous. He often committed outrageous acts in the name of research. I hope he has mellowed out by now... What's the situation?"

"Heh..."

As Kanna hesitated to answer with a slight smile, Hellem sighed.

"People never change that easily. If he's by the lord's side, that's definitely a concern. Perhaps I should go and check."

"Grandmother, are you really thinking of going to the capital? Even when your grandson wrote to you, asking you to come, you never went."

Mick, who was pouring a new drink, looked surprised.

"Oh? You have a specific reason for not going to the capital? Did I say something wrong?"

"No, no, it's not that, Kanna. I simply didn't return to the capital because there wasn't much for me to do there. I have no desire to be a burden to my family by staying home all the time as I get older."

The lord just happened to offer her a role that involves many responsibilities. Hellem sipped her wine and looked down. Yuder felt that her answer wasn't entirely truthful.

"But, looking at the situation now... it seems the lord will not be staying in Peletta as much as before."

Upon saying this, Hellem turned her eyes toward Yuder and smiled warmly.

"Even by my standards, yes."

Mick's face had also turned red up to his neck. Nodding emphatically, he moved so much that he banged his head against the wall with a thud. Thanks to that, Yuder was able to divert attention away from himself.

'So, does that mean Hellem doesn't intend to return to Peletta after this affair is over?'

Having an expert in monsters like her would undoubtedly be helpful in the future. Lost in thought for a moment, Yuder was suddenly jolted back to reality by a subtle poke to his side under the table. Turning his gaze, he saw Enon moving his lips ever so faintly.

"Everyone seems to have had enough to drink. If we're going to see the monster, we should get up now."

"..."

Ignoring those around him, Yuder slowly rose from his seat, leaving the other three engrossed in their own conversation.

As Yuder and Enon vacated their seats one after the other, the lively conversation behind them continued unabated.

"So, did you really come just to see the monster?"

"No."

"I thought as much."

Yuder stood in front of the cage positioned at the center of the dimly lit reception room, illuminated only by a single lantern. A small monster quickly approached and clung to the bars, looking towards him. It seemed like it had just been munching on a carrot, as an orange chunk dropped clumsily near its head.

Yuder watched the scene, pondering what to say first. Before coming here, he thought he'd have no problem talking upon meeting, but when he actually faced it, the words didn't come easily.

"What is it? Is it that difficult?"

"I was just in the underground dungeon."

"The underground dungeon?"

"The fourth floor."

Enon nodded slowly, already aware of the fact that Yuder had found the hidden fourth floor under the protection of magic and rescued the victims of human trafficking there.

"And?"

"There, I discovered the laboratory of a person known as the first Duke Tain."

"A laboratory, huh. So, was there something surprising?"

Yuder conveyed what he had found in the lab as ambiguously and succinctly as possible. Sketches of monsters that appeared to be researched by the first Duke Tain. An old diary intermingled with Gore scripts. And a significant sentence that Kishiar had deciphered.

"If what was written there really indicates the purpose of the research, then it might be related to what you mentioned before," Yuder said.

For a moment, the look in Enon's eyes changed slightly.

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"True... We can only be sure once we read that diary, but the odds are high enough."

"The diary is with the Commander. I think he would let us see it if we express interest... Would you be able to read it if I bring it?"

"I can read it. But first, I'd like to know why you're looking so uneasy when you say that."

Enon raised his eyebrows sharply and folded his arms.

"I'm pretty sure that's the reason you came to me today, isn't it?"

"..."

Enon's ability to discern truth from lies was, as always, impressive.

Yuder silently looked down at Pethuamet, who was hanging from the iron bars and swinging its tail. It was incredibly difficult to articulate his complicated situation and emotions.

"Enon, you know where I come from."

Although he'd ambiguously stated that he came from 'the future,' Enon would surely understand.

"But others don't."

Considering the importance of the information he held, it was wise to keep the circle of people who knew Yuder's secret to a minimum.

But that was when he could judge everything based on utility alone—when he could trust no one fully and only move forward with his own safety and the prevention of impending disasters in mind.

"Until now, I had no intention of revealing that."

He hadn't gone to great lengths to hide it either. For what Yuder wanted to accomplish, he had to move in a way that raised some suspicion. So he had been blatantly suspicious in front of people like Nathan Zuckerman to achieve his goals, and had initially revealed his identity to Enon out of necessity.

"But if I borrow that diary this time..."

"Then the Commander will likely get a better sense of what you're interested in, increasing the chances that your secret will be discovered. Is that your concern?"

"Yes."

"I thought you might have shared some of your secrets with him as well, considering how close you seem to be. Quite unexpected."

Enon moved closer to the iron bars and flicked the head of Pethuamet, who was swinging its tail in an attempt to get closer to Yuder. As the small monster toppled over, a bit of venom dripped from the tip of its tail.

"So even though he might have been suspicious of you, he just left you be? You're definitely no ordinary human."

"Yeah."

"What do you mean by 'yeah'? Think this is a compliment? I mean that you're not normally insane, both you and him!"

Exasperated, Enon took a long breath. His hand hovered near his face as if he wanted to pinch his cheeks but eventually dropped down.

"Let's clear one thing up. Is it the mere fact that your secret might be exposed that bothers you, or is there something else involving the Commander?"

Suppressing the tightening sensation in his chest, Yuder answered with minimal emotion.

"If I have to say, it's the latter."

Enon's amber eyes darkened slightly.

Yuder looked at him, opening his mouth as if he wanted to ask something more, then chose his words carefully.

"While you may have guessed to some extent, I didn't come back here just because I saw good things. A lot has changed from then to now. The environment, the people, everything."

Yudrain Aile had witnessed countless deaths and calamities, and had even been directly involved in some of them. At the end, he himself concluded his life bearing the name of a sinner. Even after his return, and after changing many things, those facts had not completely disappeared within him.

"And the one who's changed the most is the Commander."

"Right. Now I can see why you were so concerned about him without needing to hear any more."

"But so what?" Enon spat out roughly.

"If you're already suspicious but still getting along with him, what's the problem? From what I see, just go on and do your thing as you usually do. If you're really worried, just tell him as much as you've told me. You can just give him the broad strokes, leaving out the details."

"It's not that easy to..."

"So it was easy for you to barge into my peaceful life and demand my help, but this is hard? Where's that insane confidence you had? You're amusing. I'm the fool for worrying because you looked unhappy!"

Worry? Before Yuder could respond to that, Enon sharply pinched his cheek.

"Just proceed as usual! I gave you the medicine that ignited your libido; just use my name and ask for more!"

"Enon."

He wanted to tell him that he was being too loud, but his cheeks were being stretched, making it hard to speak. Seizing the opportunity, Enon pinched and shook his other cheek.

"No. I'll go see the Commander tomorrow. I've been wondering whether I'd be more useful to him these days anyway."

"Are you, really, serious?"

Even while his head was shaking, Yuder couldn't ignore those words.

"Yes!"

After giving Yuder's cheek a final firm slap, Enon sighed and rubbed his forehead. A torrent of harsh words spilled from his mouth.

"Seriously, I've never met anyone like you. It's astonishing. Why can't you just live like ordinary people, doing what you want? And I, too... Damn it!"

"Sorry."

Yuder apologized reflexively. Enon pinched his cheek again, saying not to apologize. Yuder had thought Enon hadn't taken offense until now, but seeing the fiery glint in his yellow eyes, he wondered if he'd been mistaken.

"That's it. From now on, call me 'big brother.' You're not giving anything but just causing stress, so I should at least get that level of respect."

"..."

"What, you don't like it? Fine. I don't want to be called 'grandfather' or 'uncle,' so just stick with 'big brother.'"

Enon sharply inquired as Yuder remained silent, his mouth slightly open. But the reason Yuder couldn't answer was that Enon's words had evoked memories of his past life.

Their relationship had begun in his previous life when Enon found Yuder severely injured and collapsed in a back alley. Dodging the pursuers who had followed him, Enon naturally brought Yuder to his apothecary and hid him, pretending he was his younger brother. After that incident, Enon naturally began calling himself "big brother."

Of course, Yuder had not played along with this act, but their mysterious connection had continued, and Yuder had often been compelled to refer to him as "big brother" as a result.

"Is it that hard to let me heal you? Huh? Are you some kind of animal? Why do you always get so defensive? Do you even know how expensive this medicine is? There's more to life than just getting injured. Why don't you just carry some weight in my apothecary?"

Initially, Yuder did not trust Enon. He thought Enon's appearance and circumstances were suspicious.

However, as their relationship continued over the years, Yuder had no choice but to believe at least that Enon had a disposition that wouldn't turn away those in need.

Enon's apothecary was always open to the poor in the capital. Despite his harsh manner, he gave medicine to everyone without demanding much payment. Many genuinely liked him. For those who couldn't even afford to go to a temple or a doctor, that place was the only sanctuary they could comfortably seek.

Enon never charged Yuder for the treatment either. Once, when Yuder tried to leave a significant amount of money, Enon firmly told him to just treat him like an older brother instead. His nature had not changed, even in the last letter he left behind.

And now, after such a long time, he said the same thing to Yuder again.

"..."

"Young lad, where did you pick up the bad habit of trying to bear everything alone..."

Yuder stared blankly at Enon's grumbling face and then lowered his eyes.

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A strange feeling had washed over him. Despite being yelled at and scolded, it didn't feel bad; it felt as though he had returned to an almost forgotten childhood.

"Did you two have a fight or something? You guys are being so loud."

Perhaps having heard Enon's incessant complaints, the drinkers finally leaned in. Mick, flushed from alcohol, nonchalantly draped an arm over Enon and Yuder, linking arms with both.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing at all."

Upon Yuder's denial, Mick chuckled as if he didn't care, the scent of alcohol heavy on his breath. Kanna, arriving a bit late, also looked flushed as she scrutinized Yuder.

"Really, you didn't fight? I thought Yuder got scolded by the pharmacist."

Though she tried to make her eyes sharp, this was probably the most effortless facial expression Kanna had ever displayed. It seemed pretty clear that she had drunk more than her usual amount.

"Ah, Kanna. You wanted to see the monster, right? Here it is."

Before Yuder could answer, Mick lightly tapped the cage that contained the monster, immediately drawing everyone's attention. Yuder and Enon exchanged a silent signal that seemed to say their conversation should end here.

"We're done with our research, so we were thinking of naming the creature. But we haven't come up with any good ideas yet."

"Can you just name a monster like that?"

"Of course. If you're the first to discover a new monster, anyone can name it. Since the Cavalry, the Duke, and the Western Mage Union didn't give it a name, it's left to us, isn't it?"

"I see. I didn't know that."

"It's understandable. So many new monsters appear every year that it's pointless to get caught up in names. Still, if you want to make it easier for everyone involved, it's better if those who discover the monster name it themselves."

Hellem interjected.

"Would you two mind helping us think of a name while you're here?"

"Hmm..."

Kanna frowned as she looked down at the monster.

Naming it wouldn't be a pleasant task, given that she remembered the havoc this monster had wreaked in the Great Sarain Forest.

"For reference, I suggested the name 'Penpen,' which Grandma thought was too tame."

"Penpen?"

"It's what they call a doll made of bundled straw in the northern regions. Don't you think it looks a bit like it?"

It didn't look like it at all. Kanna seemed to share Yuder's opinion, avoiding eye contact.

"That's nonsense. You can't give a monster such a cutesy name."

"There's no legal rule against it. Anyway, no one's going to call it by that name and it'll be forgotten soon, so why not just go with something arbitrary?"

Mick argued vigorously against Hellem's rebuke. Yuder felt a sense of unfamiliarity in one part of what he had said.

'It will be forgotten soon... is that so? This time it will be.'

In his previous life, Pethuamet had inflicted enormous damage upon the empire, so they had named it after a demon in the legends to serve as a long-standing point of reference.

He could have suggested naming this monster 'Pethuamet' again, but Yuder decided against it. This time, it felt far better to go with an insignificant name, just like Mick had suggested.

"What do you think, Yuder?"

"I think Mr. Mick's opinion is reasonable."

"...Really?"

Kanna wore an expression that seemed to doubt Yuder's taste.

"See? The assistant knows what's up."

Mick laughed heartily, looking satisfied. Hellem sighed and suggested they think about it a little more.

Yuder found himself gazing at a small monster, its tail tinged with a shade of purple. He felt threatened as people crowded around them. Suddenly, he remembered once again the research objectives of the first Duke Tain.

‘To find out where the monsters come from...’

Sacred texts imbued with the words of God explain the existence of monsters as a curse from the Black Moon. Though the power of the Black Moon had been overpowered and hidden from the world by those who demonstrated the strength of the Sun God, the cursed blood was said to still remain. When given an opportunity, it would seep into the world, manifesting as monsters.

Whether one was devout or not, the origin of monsters was generally accepted. Ask anyone other than Yuder, and they would give no more explanation.

But what if the first Duke Tain thought otherwise?

‘It's as if questioning whether God really exists,’ Yuder mused.

Though his thoughts might differ if he spoke with Enon, it seemed best to reserve that conversation for another time.

While Yuder was lost in thought, the topic of conversation among the group changed once again. Hellem took a sip from her glass of liquor as she listened to Kanna talk about the poor relations between the Cavalry and the Imperial Knights. In particular, Kiolle from the House of Diarca had even challenged Yuder to a duel.

"The youngest of the House of Diarca? He's grown that old already?"

"Wow, Grandma Hellem, do you also know that knight?"

"Know him? Let's just say he left an impression because he was so audacious."

"Why?"

Yuder had been disinterested until Kiolle's name came up, but now it was a different story.

"When Kiolle was born, the Duke of Diarca directly asked the Empress to name his son. And the name the Empress bestowed used far too many letters that were intentionally similar to those of the Second Prince Kishiar at the time, which created a big uproar."

Yuder hadn't expected the conversation to suddenly involve Kishiar. As Yuder turned his head, Kanna cautiously asked, "Was that such a big deal?"

"A big deal indeed. No noble would dare to name their child so closely to that of a prince or princess destined to lead the nation. Historically unprecedented, it cast doubt on their intentions... it was a move that made many uncomfortable."

Hellem seemed to hold some certainty about this, despite cutting her sentence short.

"The characters in the Emperor's and lord Kishiar's, contain sounds that were chosen intentionally by the previous Emperor to emulate a hero he admired, adhering to the royal naming conventions. However, the Duke of Diarca, knowing this, subtly crossed the line right from the time he named his first child."

Finally, by the time he named Kiolle, the similarity between Kishiar and Kiolle's names became a topic of gossip and exploded in the public eye.

It might sound like a small, old dispute over the names of children, but there seemed to be a deeper story beneath it. However, Hellem didn't elaborate any further. She simply stared at the little liquor left in her glass and let out a deep sigh.

"Enough of these uninteresting old tales. Drinking makes it all the less enjoyable."

She drained her remaining drink and suggested it was time to truly rest. Mick, who had drunk the most yet still wanted more, was disappointed, but Yuder had no complaints.

"I apologize for coming so late. I should be on my way now."

"You're welcome anytime. But before you go, Yuder, would you call me Grandma just once?"

Although he agreed, Yuder found it a little difficult.

"I apologize. Please consider me as being respectful to the degree of calling you 'Madam Hellem.'"

"I've thought this since I first met you; you're quite stubborn. Now I see why my Lord wanted to keep you by his side."

"..."

Yuder was silent, not knowing how to respond, and Hellem quietly smiled.

"However, I think it would be better if Kanna stays here for the night."

Yuder turned his head and found Kanna, who had become extremely drowsy in her seat. Seeing her nodding off, it was clear that walking back together was out of the question.

"That seems best."

"She can sleep in my room; I'll send her home tomorrow."

"Thank you."

As Hellem took care of Kanna, Mick and Enon bid Yuder farewell.

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"Hmm, I wanted to see you drunk, but it's unfortunate. You're not even tipsy, are you?"

Mick spoke with a slightly twisted tongue, vowing to prepare stronger alcohol next time. It was a futile effort; it wouldn't have mattered.

Enon, who was supporting the swaying figure beside him, spoke with a furrowed brow and a tired expression.

"Go to bed, you drunkard. And as for you... it's late. Can't you just rest here for the night? Is there a reason you must leave right now?"

He had said he would check on the monster briefly, but there was no pressing need to leave immediately. Staying for the night like Kanna had done wouldn't pose any problems.

Yet Yuder, after a moment of silence, shook his head.

He didn't want to, knowing Kishiar was alone back at the lodging.

"...Thanks for the offer, but I'll be going."

Enon seemed to have expected this, somehow. He sighed deeply and licked his lips as if to say he understood. He closed his mouth, swallowing whatever he had been about to say, and let go of the supporting Mick.

"Fine, then. See you tomorrow."

"Sure."

"Ah! Speaking of which."

Just as Yuder was turning to leave, Mick, who had been leaning on Enon, suddenly perked up and shouted. Had anyone with a weak heart been present, they would have been startled to the point of collapse. Neither Yuder nor Enon reacted, merely observing Mick's antics.

"Sir, you seem to have fewer holes than before. I've been counting, and it seems right. Or is it not? Eh? It seemed so earlier, but now I'm not so sure."

"..."

"Heh, heh, just saying. I don't know if it's because you're healing, but it's fortunate, anyway... Next time, my Lord should join us for drinks. He can hold his liquor quite well, too..."

Mick's ramblings were cut short as he slumped over again, snoring loudly. Enon muttered disdainfully.

"This guy, when he gets drunk, he keeps getting up and shouting, making a ruckus."

"You've seen it a lot, I take it."

"He's practically an alcoholic. He always finds an excuse to drink at least a bottle a day. At least he doesn't throw up or crawl on the ground. Still, to think he's the owner of this establishment. I'm starting to doubt its legitimacy."

It seemed like he had witnessed this behavior more than once during their joint research. Had Yuder found it disruptive, he would have sought immediate solutions. But Enon, despite his complaints, made sure Mick didn't bang his head against the wall, showing his caring nature.

It was this side of him that made others gradually lean on Enon more. Lusan had done so, and now Mick, and even Yuder, whether he cared to admit it or not.

As Yuder stared at this scene, Enon abruptly asked,

"Are you not leaving?"

He had to go. But Yuder hesitated for a moment, his step faltering as Mick snored audibly, blending with the sounds of nocturnal insects.

After a long, silent pause, Yuder whispered in a voice so soft it was almost drowned out by the ambient noise.

"...Enon."

"What now? Don't you remember me saying to treat me like an older brother earlier? Although someone who refused to call 'grandma' is unlikely to agree to that..."

"Big brother."

Enon, who had been continuing his biting comments, suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"You... what did you just say?"

"Thanks for today. But you don't have to come tomorrow."

With that, Yuder leapt into the wind, soaring away.

Sounds from below suggested that something was going on, but Yuder paid them no mind. Inexplicable sensations simmered and churned within him, only to ebb away repeatedly.

He arrived swiftly at the towering mansion of the Willhem family, not far from his location. No one noticed Yuder's presence as he entered the dimly lit house, where most people were asleep, and silently ascended the staircase.

Yuder knocked very softly on the door of the quarters. When no answer came, he slowly turned the handle. The man he had expected to be asleep in bed was not there. Only then, as he turned his head toward the magic stone stove that was the only source of light in the room, did he see Kishiar, sitting in a chair with his eyes closed.

'Is he... sleeping?'

Yuder cautiously approached him. The usual Kishiar would have opened his eyes by now, but there was no response.

This was a first, and Yuder found it somewhat disconcerting.

Just as Yuder was about to speak, his gaze fell upon the objects on the table beside Kishiar. An old diary brought from the underground dungeons of the security force, and two letters he had been reading before departing. All this was as he had expected, but his attention was freshly captured by a new, open letter.

After completing his task of sealing the letters, the torn wax seal looked all too familiar. It was the emblem used by the Emperor residing in the Sun Palace when sending secret correspondence.

So, a letter from Emperor Keilusa has already arrived while he was meeting Enon? The communication was faster than anticipated.

"..."

Unknowingly fixated on the letter, Yuder suddenly felt a stirring beside him.

"Commander..."

Thinking that Kishiar had risen, Yuder hastily turned, only to be met by Kishiar's still-closed eyes and pale face.

Kishiar had not yet awakened, but he also did not seem to be having a peaceful dream. His shallow breaths were rougher than usual, and his long eyelashes fluttered uneasily beneath his furrowed brows.

Only after noting the sweat trickling down between Kishiar's temples, in the flickering shadows of the flame, did Yuder grab his shoulder and shake him.

"Commander? Commander!"

A barely audible sound emanated faintly from Kishiar's throat.

"Commander, wake up. Commander!"

Shaking the shoulder more vigorously than before, Yuder cautiously touched the man's neck and face with a gloved hand.

"Cold."

Startled by the icy chill of the skin, Yuder was about to retract his hand when suddenly, Kishiar's fingers swiftly gripped his hand. Losing his balance, Yuder fell onto Kishiar's body.

"..."

Just as Yuder was trying to rise quickly and adjust his posture, a faint voice floated above his head.

"No, Yudrain..."

A heavy mumble.

For a moment, everything seemed to come to a standstill.

He felt as if all the blood in his body had rushed to his feet, draining away and leaving him dizzy.

Forgetting even to breathe, Yuder felt the grip on his hand loosening after what seemed like an eternity.

As Yuder's hand fell limp against Kishiar's body, the man twitched.

Finally, Kishiar's eyelids fluttered and his red eyes came sharply into focus. For a moment, Kishiar seemed to struggle with his sense of reality, blinking quietly as he looked at Yuder's face, frozen and pallid before him. Kishiar's hand moved to touch Yuder's hair and cheek lightly. Then, a moment later, the familiar faint smile finally curled at the corners of his lips.

"...What is this? My assistant has a talent for waking me up in unexpected ways, it seems."

"..."

Despite his gentle jest, Yuder found it difficult to speak. His eyes, heavy with a dark undertow, scanned Kishiar's face relentlessly through the sharply indrawn breaths.

At this, Kishiar finally tilted his head, as if sensing something unusual.

"What's the matter? Was there some incident outside?"

"...You, Commander didn't wake up."

For a moment, Yuder's voice was astonishingly constricted.

"Ah, did I sleep so deeply that it surprised you? That happens occasionally."

"No, it's not that you simply didn't wake up..."

Yuder hesitated, unsure how to explain what he had just witnessed. He clenched his teeth. For the first time, he realized how difficult it was to keep his composure. With his fist clenched tightly, he finally forced the words out, drawing on the sharp pain sinking into his palm.

"I tried to wake you because it seemed like you were having a bad dream..."

"Hmm..."

"Do you remember, by any chance, what dream you had?"

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Yuder tried to ask cautiously, hiding his tension as best as he could, but he couldn't tell if he had succeeded. Kishiar's gaze seemed to blur for a moment. The man who appeared to be recollecting distant memories soon lightly shook his head.

"It wasn't a pleasant dream, that's for sure... but I can't remember anymore. Was my condition that alarming for my assistant to be so concerned?"

It wasn't merely a matter of looking unwell.

If he had heard correctly, Kishiar had called out a certain name.

A name that no longer existed, a name that had died and vanished.

Even if it was a slurred whisper spoken in a drowsy state, there was no way Yuder wouldn't recognize that name.

"In your sleep, you spoke to me... Don't you remember that?"

"Spoke?"

Kishiar closed and opened his eyes, slightly furrowing his brows.

"...Nothing comes to mind. May I ask what I said?"

'Does he truly not remember?'

Yuder scrutinized Kishiar's face for a long while, knowing there was no particular reason for him to lie. Kishiar, in return, seemed to be evaluating Yuder intently with fully awake eyes.

The emotions flickering in those eyes were just as calm and clear as ever, filled with curiosity and a deep, cautious concern directed at Yuder.

And so, Yuder finally became certain.

'...He truly doesn't remember.'

Kishiar had genuinely forgotten what he had just dreamt. Only after confirming this several times did Yuder feel the tension within his eyes relax. He pondered intensely for a brief moment whether to answer Kishiar's question, all while trying to suppress his own surprise and shock.

Even if he doesn't remember now, might mentioning it trigger something?

What would happen next?

A shapeless, dark shadow seemed to writhe in his gut. He wanted to escape all of this immediately, yet the moment he met Kishiar's deep, cautious gaze, he had no choice but to accept a certain truth.

Even in a moment where profound confusion clawed at his heart, the flame of desire within Yuder hadn't diminished in the slightest.

If Kishiar wanted to know, then he had to tell him.

Feeling his heart race uncontrollably, Yuder slowly opened his mouth to speak.

"No, Yudrain... That's what you said."

Kishiar's brows furrowed a few times before returning to normal.

"Even hearing it... I still don't remember."

His eyes were, once again, speaking the truth.

Feeling his heartbeat slow down, Yuder took a deep breath.

He lowered his eyes and inhaled slowly, counting to one before exhaling, repeating the cycle a few times. Gradually, warmth returned to his cold hands.

It was a short period, almost imperceptible, but enough for him to regain his composure. Ironically, it was the simplest calming technique that Kishiar had taught him in a previous life. He had forgotten about it until now, not having had the need for it, but in this moment, it naturally came to mind.

Only then did Yuder realize he was still seated next to Kishiar. He leaned on the armrest of his chair to get up, and Kishiar's gaze followed his every move.

"You seem far worse than I do. Are you sure nothing happened outside? What about Kanna?"

"Nothing happened."

His voice sounded far more stable than before. Yuder found relief in this fact and added further explanation.

"Kanna is staying there tonight, thanks to Hellem's hospitality. She'll be back tomorrow."

"Judging by the smell of alcohol, I suppose you've been drinking."

"...Yes."

Kishiar replied as if it was plainly obvious, though he wasn't intoxicated, and his clothes weren't damp from any drink. His sense of smell must have been keen.

Yuder briefly explained what he had done there. Kishiar's expression remained unchanged, just as it had been a few hours ago when Yuder last saw him.

A familiar sight. A familiar face.

And superimposed upon it, another man with the same face, his eyes carrying the weariness and pallor of illness.

The moment Yuder thought of him, all efforts to calm himself seemed worthless. Once again, he recalled the voice that used to murmur a name now buried and forgotten.

'No, Yudrain...'

Even if one doesn't remember, it's not an ordinary thing. How could Kishiar even mention a name he should know nothing about?

The eerie possibility that he, too, saw his past life through dreams seemed somewhat plausible, though he didn't remember upon waking.

Then why Kishiar of all people?

He wasn't someone who had turned back time like Yuder. Yet, if he was seeing his past life through dreams, there must be a reason. Amid his fervent search for that reason, a word suddenly popped into Yuder's mind.

'Connection.'

Kishiar once mentioned that he felt and saw a thin thread-like strange connection when he tried to find Yuder battling the massive Pethuamet. Following that thread led him to Yuder—a scarcely believable experience that had also appeared to Yuder not long ago.

A single glowing link that appeared for a moment when Yuder was desperately searching for Kishiar in the darkness.

Though he had never seen it in his past life, he felt 'connected' to Kishiar at that moment. This started after the accident that happened on the day of his second gender manifestation.

Many memories related to that day had been forgotten until they slowly started to resurface. At that time, Yuder had felt so intermingled with Kishiar's emotions that it was difficult to distinguish between the two. It was a horrifying sensation in some respects.

However, after Kishiar died, Yuder never felt that sensation again. According to the last dream he had, it seemed like Kishiar had somehow discerned the nature of that 'connection' and hinted at a possible solution.

The connection severed after his death. And then something again connected them in this life, thread-like.

Though he believed the two to be different, they were alike in that both connected Yuder and Kishiar.

'Could this inexplicable thread be influencing Kishiar?'

If emotions could mix, why not memories? The idea that Kishiar might be influenced by Yuder's memories seemed a better explanation than the notion that only Kishiar dreamt of a past life.

'But nothing happened during the second gender manifestation this time, so where did this connection even start?'

Wasn't the connection from the previous life already severed long ago?

Could it be restored by coming back to a time when Kishiar was alive? Was that even possible?

Why did this thread exist between them in the first place?

Despite knowing that pondering wouldn't provide a logical answer, Yuder couldn't stop his thoughts. And Kishiar, too, noticed once more that Yuder's gaze was directed at him.

"...Yuder."

Yuder snapped to attention.

"I'm sure you're tired, coming all the way here and delivering your report so late at night. I apologize for causing you additional worry."

"No, it's fine."

Kishiar seemed to assume that Yuder's reaction was mostly due to an excessive concern directed at him.

"Tomorrow is going to be even busier than today, so you should get some rest soon. I received a message from His Majesty during your absence. Judging by the timing, it seems he sent it right after waking up."

Upon hearing that, Yuder's gaze reflexively shifted to the table. Until he heard the shocking name from Kishiar's lips, his nerves had been on edge with all sorts of speculations about Kishiar's strange dream and its connection to the Emperor's letter. But now, he felt somewhat relieved.

"Did His Majesty issue an order for a quick return?"

"No."

Kishiar looked down at the letter, his expression displaying a deeper smile than usual.

"The message is succinct. First, it informs us that the investigators dispatched to look into Baron Willhem and the illegal auction will arrive here soon. Secondly, it orders that the Cavalry members active in the west must return to the capital on the same day."

It sounded like a formal message that belied any notion that it was sent by someone who had just collapsed. However, Yuder soon realized that wasn't all there was to it.

"The Cavalry members must return to the capital on the same day, meaning..."

"In other words, regardless of any previous messages we've received, we're supposed to finish all our duties here and return at our leisure. Just make sure nothing changes the schedule," Kishiar concluded, confirming Yuder's own thoughts.

The letter was cold and impersonal, urging a sibling to focus only on work, even while knowing that death was drawing near. Though one might interpret it as a letter implying "I've woken up safely, so don't worry," the undercurrent of bitterness was undeniable.

It was clear that Emperor Keilusa had anticipated his brother's inclination to rush back and sent such a letter preemptively.

Cold pragmatism, which sometimes brought comfort to others, did not always do so. At least, when looking at the subtle but noticeably cooler expression on Kishiar's face since waking up, it was clear the letter had not only brought relief.

Yuder broke the silence. "Commander, will you follow His Majesty's orders?"

"I've received them, so I'll have to obey. However, complying with all procedures will take time, so we'll need to find a way to speed that up."

Kishiar didn't seem content to just obediently follow the orders. His statement that tomorrow would be busier than today appeared to have been made with that in mind.

Kishiar folded up the letter that had been lying open on the table and put it back into its envelope. As he tossed the letter into the magic stove to burn it, Yuder pondered about Emperor Keilusa.

In his previous life, he had not known much about the last Emperor of the previous imperial line, but he seemed to be a more calculated and planned individual than Yuder had expected. To prioritize scheduled matters and firmly push away the concerns of those around him, even while feeling the approach of his own death, was no ordinary composure.

And that quality surprisingly reminded him of Kishiar from his past life.

Standing side by side, the Emperor and Kishiar had atmospheres that were complete opposites. However, as brothers who shared the same blood, it was natural for them to have many similarities. Raised in the same place, spending the same amount of time together, and working towards the same goals, it wasn't surprising that their actions felt similar.

Could he then understand the Kishiar of his past life through what he felt from Keilusa?

'...No matter what I do, I can't seem to get my mind off of him.'

His thoughts circled endlessly around Kishiar, to the point where he couldn't help but give a bitter chuckle at his own preoccupation.

In the meantime, having confirmed that the letter had turned to ash, Kishiar stood up and headed towards the bed. It seemed he assumed there would be no more conversation for the night and was preparing to sleep.

The night had deepened, edging closer to dawn. Given that it had been a long day full of activities, and news had even come that the Emperor had collapsed and then awakened, it probably wasn't wise to press further about the nightmare just yet.

Turning

Chapter 437

Because of this, Yuder decided to quell his confusion and take some time to investigate the phenomena related to Kishiar and his dreams.

The next day, just after dawn, the whole of the Orr Empire was turned upside down multiple times.

Firstly, the news of the illegal trade secretly orchestrated by Duke Tain and the arrest of the people involved in the secret auctions held in Tainu were publicly announced with the Emperor's approval.

The news itself was shocking, but what took everyone by surprise was that it had been uncovered by the Cavalry, which had gone to the west for monster subjugation, and Duke Peletta.

Duke Peletta was known to be staying briefly in Tainu to wrap things up after the monster subjugation. Amidst this, the fact that he had captured those involved in illegally kidnapping Awakeners and buying dangerous items illegally had led straight back to Baron Willhem and Duke Tain. This revelation had many expressing their fears and sighs.

The Cavalry spared no nobles who had participated in the illegal auction and revealed each of their names. The fact that members of the Apeto family who had previously fled justice were among them hardly surprised anyone at this point.

With this development, rumors that Duke Peletta was the new owner of the Divine Sword no longer seemed like simple jokes. The Cavalry also began to attract much more attention than before they had left for the West.

However, despite all these astonishing achievements, people still knew very little about Duke Peletta and the Cavalry.

Some insisted that it was all an exaggeration, claiming that Duke Peletta wasn't capable enough to accomplish such feats. Others recoiled at rumors that he was an egregious philanderer who always had men by his side.

While many spun conspiracy theories about the true nature of the incidents in the distant West, one thing was clear: Duke Tain's family had not denied any of it.

Not even the Duke's cousin, the head of the imperial knights, Theorado, nor the influential elders of the Tain family who had retired to a life of obscurity, showed any signs of protest. Nobles who supported Duke Tain protested, claiming the allegations were preposterous, but the fact that the influential members of the Tain family did not defend him was highly suggestive.

Gossip lovers speculated that this revealed long-standing internal discord within Duke Tain's family. The theory that family members had momentarily allied with the Emperor to overthrow the current Duke gained considerable traction.

As if to confirm these rumors, no sooner had the news of the Duke facing trial been announced than the family quickly convened a meeting to announce the previously vacant successor. Priscilla van Tain, the second daughter who had been shrouded in secrecy, was granted the authority to manage family affairs.

Her older brother, Pruelle van Tain, who had been considered the most likely next Duke, announced his full support for Priscilla's succession.

The current Duke's sole wife and mother to all his children, Duchess Clandie, also declared in a letter sent from her distant southern villa that she would abide by the decisions made in the family council, thus supporting her children.

Opinions across different strata of the Empire were quite divided on this news.

Duke Diarca and those who followed him had defended Duke Tain, asserting that putting a noble family that had led their dukedom for a thousand years on trial solely based on some voices within the family and the Emperor's will, without clear evidence, was historically unprecedented.

Of course, his defense was not because he was fond of Duke Tain. Those who followed Duke Diarca were wary of Duke Tain's trial that had come to light shortly after the Apeto affair, as well as any potential rise in the Emperor's faction as a result.

The Crown Prince Katchian, who had been keeping silent for unclear reasons, did not express his opinion, but people naturally assumed that what Duke Diarca said reflected his own thoughts as well.

As for the Apeto dukedom, its firstborn son Aishes, who was not capable of managing his own family, and Duke Herne, who was recovering in his homeland, did not openly object like Duke Diarca but indirectly showed their intent to keep an eye on the situation.

Most nobles were uneasy at the upheaval in yet another ancient dukedom but also predicted that it was merely an internal shift in another family's power and nothing significant would change.

In reality, many had disappeared after the tragedy of the Apeto family, and even the Duke of Apeto had fallen. But months had passed, and the majority believed that not much had actually changed. The fact that Aishes, who had become the acting Duke of Apeto, had not followed the Emperor as closely as expected had significantly contributed to this sense of relief.

Everyone knew that the Emperor didn't have enough power to engage the nobles in open conflict. He was struggling to prevent becoming a mere puppet, bolstering his power through the Cavalry and Duke Peletta, but what could someone who didn't even show his face actually achieve?

As many nobles oscillated between caution and dismissiveness, the Empire's court calendar was once again filled with a new series of large-scale trials after a period of quiet following the Apeto family tragedy. And again, all eyes were on this matter.

Ordinary people living outside the realm of politics were angry at the crimes committed by Duke Tain and grateful for the swift action by the Emperor and Duke Peletta. Some neighboring countries hurriedly distanced themselves, fearing revelations of illegal trade, while other foreign lands watched the unfolding events with great interest for their own gain and curiosity.

But the attention wasn't solely political.

A minister from one country emphasized the central role of the Cavalry in handling this affair and strongly advocated for creating a similar organization in his own nation. Latecomers to the study of the Awakeners also emerged.

Though the Empire's nobles barely paid attention, the Cavalry, the only organization that had successfully gathered the mysterious Awakeners, were taking steps that increasingly held a different meaning than before.

And Yuder Aile, considered one of the key figures in the Cavalry, burdened with the weighty task of attempting something crucial with Duke Peletta that night, stood behind Kishiar, listening to the conversations.

"Is that the final list of members, then?"

"Yes, everyone here will become part of the Western Branch."

Kishiar had gotten to work at an incredible speed, setting up the Western Branch immediately upon waking. No one had expected that he would finalize the list of members and explain the structure to them in just a few hours.

If Baron Koelt were to fully replace Baron Willhem, the operations of the Cavalry's local branch could commence immediately with just a single approval. Such was the efficiency and perfection of the arrangements.

The faces of those who would soon become members of the Cavalry unit's western branch were filled with tension as they looked at Kishiar. Yuder specifically noticed the expression on the face of Emun Philang, who was standing among them. All those joining the branch were volunteers, and surprisingly, Emun was the first to raise his hand, expressing his desire to become a part of the western branch.

The reason Emun, who typically avoided drawing attention to himself, stepped forward was simple. He wanted to continue assisting the memory-lost individuals and the Awakeners who were victims of human trafficking whom he had been caring for alongside Lusan. Even as he stuttered with a flushed face, his intent was clear. Recognizing this, Kishiar immediately appointed Emun as the acting head of the western branch.

"Very well, Emun. It's best for you to get accustomed to the work by participating in the conclusion of this current matter alongside the Deputy Commanders."

"Yes, yes, I will."

"The first task for the western branch will be to look after and protect the Star of Nagran left here, as well as the awakened individuals who are struggling in the west. It won't be easy to oversee so many people, but I trust you."

The matter of the Star of Nagran had not yet been officially announced. Kishiar planned to complete all investigations regarding them and, depending on the severity of their crimes, segregate them for management within the western branch.

Emun's face lit up with renewed determination at Kishiar's words.

"I understand. I will do my best."

"Good."

The next group Kishiar met were individuals sent by Emperor Keilusa to Tainu to investigate the secret auction more systematically. They respectfully knelt before Kishiar, who had come to greet them, and received an update on the work carried out by both the Cavalry and the Peletta Knights. From this point on, they would be responsible for investigation and punishment in the western region, taking over from the Cavalry after their departure.

Turning

Chapter 438

Yuder silently observed from a distance as Kishiar engaged in conversations with the Emperor's officials, who openly admired the way he had been handling matters. Although their ranks seemed to be rather high based on the introductions, their faces were entirely unfamiliar to Yuder. It was because he had never met them in his previous life.

Naturally, this was to be expected. If these were people whom Emperor Keilusa trusted enough to send this far, it was likely they hadn't retained their positions since the ascension of Emperor Katchian.

Kishiar appeared to be well-acquainted with them as he mingled friendly banter with discussions about future plans. Yuder, observing Kishiar's radiant and healthy face, was reminded of the events from last night.

Despite the numerous occurrences yesterday, the interactions between Kishiar and Yuder had progressed just like any other day. There were no disturbances in their meals or daily tasks.

However, Yuder felt an indescribable sense that something unknown and hidden lay within that handsome visage. Though Kishiar seemed to have forgotten all about his sleep-talking, Yuder found it difficult to cease his discreet yet persistent observations.

"...Ah, is that the rumored young man your assistant from the Cavalry unit?"

Just then, one of the officials sent by Emperor Keilusa inquired about Yuder, drawing his attention. Yuder snapped out of his reverie and turned his head.

"Yuder is indeed my assistant, but I'm not sure what you mean by 'the rumored,' Melina. Could you clarify?"

"Do you really want to hear it?"

Melina, the official addressed, responded to Kishiar's curious question without hesitation.

"The rumors vary quite a lot. From tales of him indulging in drinking monster blood after slaying them, to being an Awakener with a second gender who possesses mysterious powers that can easily capture Your Highness, to even being strikingly beautiful at first glance. Particularly, the gossip about occupying a rest area at a party and eventually destroying the bed has been buzzing even beyond Tainu."

Yuder had a rough idea of how rumors about him might circulate, but hearing them so directly and explicitly was a first.

The malicious rumor about drinking monster blood probably originated from those who had seen the stains left by Pethuamet's blood. As for the rumors about breaking beds or being beautiful, those were intentional byproducts of the romantic schemes orchestrated by Kishiar, so they weren't a concern.

But the rumor about him being a second-gender Awakener was baffling. How did that get mixed in? While Yuder remained silent, Kishiar burst into laughter.

"So, listening to all this, it seems none of you believe a word of it?"

"It's our job not to believe things too easily. Aren't they obviously false rumors?"

True to their words, the officials' faces didn't reveal any personal emotions despite speaking directly about the rumors.

"Good attitude," Kishiar complimented them with a smile and then turned his head toward Yuder. Their eyes met, and it felt like peering into a calm, deep lake.

"But there's a difference between being skeptical and outright dismissing something as false without attempting to discern the truth. You see, in this world, there's almost no such thing as a perfect lie. Most lies carry shards of truth within them."

The message was clearly intended for the officials. Yet, Yuder felt as if it was directed at him, especially the part about there being no perfect lies.

"...Is that so? I couldn't even guess that the aspects I mentioned carry shards of truth. In that case, we will take note of the parts you claim to be factual, Your Highness."

"Ah, Melina. Can't you tell what's a fragment of truth at first glance?"

Kishiar tilted his head, asking the question in a serious tone.

"Where can you find a more accurate fragment of truth than the fact that my assistant is incredibly beautiful?"

"..."

For a moment, everyone's gaze simultaneously shifted to Yuder, only to return back to silence. Yuder, who had thought that he would speak about the second gender, also found his mind empty for the first time in a while. Fortunately, the official deftly changed the subject.

"Um... I see. Yes, understood. Your Highness, there are several important matters I'd like to discuss with you. Could we have the room?"

Given the look from the assistant, who obviously didn't want to speak about the real truth, Kishiar consented. Thanks to this, Yuder was able to step outside for a moment.

The place where they had been working all day was a space inside the mansion that, until a few days ago, had served as Baron Willhem's office. The Cavalry members guarding the exterior looked at Yuder with curiosity.

"Why did you come out alone? Where is the Commander?"

"He said they have important matters to discuss."

"I see. We're about to switch shifts; want to get some fresh air with us?"

Yuder quietly shook his head. The members seemed a bit disappointed, but Yuder barely had the energy left to even think about them. He walked over to a window and took a long breath.

Tainu had regained its peace at an astonishing speed since the day of the auction, and it was incredibly quiet today as well. Yet Yuder's mind was focused solely on those who were still in the office.

'I've spent so much time with him, and yet he's still so inscrutable.'

One moment he makes cryptic comments about lies and truth, and the next he suddenly changes the atmosphere with a joke. Was it a form of consideration, or was it an extreme attempt to hide his thoughts? It was hard to guess.

Did he mean not to take yesterday's events too seriously? Did he intend to overlook and move on from Yuder Aile's unusually different behavior this time as well?

'...Considering the Emperor's health, now is not the time to focus on other matters.'

If it had been before, he would have regained his composure the moment he made such an assumption. But he didn't feel as good about it now.

He hadn't wanted to realize that peace could make a person anxious in this way. For Yuder, it was an uncomfortably unfamiliar moment.

Unfamiliar emotions bubbled up like the surface of the sea on a stormy day.

"...Yuder!"

Just then, a familiar voice came from behind him. It was Kanna, wedged between the members who had come to switch shifts. With a face that still hadn't shaken off the hangover, Kanna waved her hand and came over, patting Yuder on the back.

"What the heck, man? Leaving me there alone, do you know how surprised I was when I woke up and the sun was already high in the sky, and I was the only one lying in Grandma Hellem's room?"

She said that, despite the heavy drinking yesterday, surprisingly everyone else had woken up before Kanna. After reading the teasing intent hidden in Mick's casual suggestion to have breakfast, she had declined and returned late to Baron Willhem's mansion. As he listened to this story, Yuder found himself thinking about Kishiar again.

If he had Kanna's kind of power, could he have quickly understood the unbelievable sleep talk he had heard last night? Could one read information even the speaker himself couldn't remember with such a power?

From the start, about this strange 'connection'...

"What happened, exactly?"

The train of thought that had been chugging along suddenly came to a halt, interrupted by a heavy question. Kanna's eyes, which had been fluttering nervously, were now shining with a completely different light as she looked at Yuder.

"..."

"For a moment, I sensed an overwhelmingly negative emotion from you... No, not sensed—I read it, even though I didn't intend to..."

Yuder paused his contemplations to meet her gaze. In her deep blue irises, faint glimmers of azure swayed. His eyes carefully scanned hers, moving between worry and puzzlement, yet filled with caution.

The fact that she'd spoken up when she didn't have to meant that Kanna trusted and cared for him deeply. On the other hand, it also meant that the gates to his emotions had become so lax that she had unintentionally read into them.

To think that he'd been so easily read by her, despite being a decade older, left him feeling a bit foolish. At the same time, he felt a complicated sense of pride in Kanna's remarkable growth.

"Um, ah, no. It might have been because I'm not feeling well from a hangover. If I said something weird and upset you, I'm really s—"

"It's alright. You weren't wrong."

While maintaining eye contact, Yuder gently furrowed his brows and interrupted Kanna before she could apologize further.

"I wasn't offended."

"Really?"

Yuder faintly lifted the corners of his lips. Whether it was from her effort paying off, Kanna's complexion finally brightened a little.

"Yuder, what really happened?"

Instead of answering, he studied Kanna, whose dark circles were more prominent due to her hangover, and then slowly opened his mouth.

"You said you read a negative emotion from me. Can you specify what you read?"

"Uh... well."

"It's okay, just be honest."

Seemingly worried, Kanna let out a deep sigh before answering, "Alright."

"Anxiety, worry... something like that. And... fear."

Anxiety, worry, and fear. Yuder echoed Kanna's words in his mind.

"At first, I thought it wasn't coming from you. It was so strong that I felt a tingling sensation in my chest bone... But your expression remained the same as always, so..."

"..."

"Yuder, are you afraid of something?"

Turning

Chapter 439

"Is there anything that frightens you?" It was an unexpected question.

In his previous life, Yuder had never really considered anything to be truly frightening. After figuring out how to deal with monsters that his powers couldn't affect, he'd stopped worrying too much about them. Physical pain or people that others found scary had never been a threat to him either.

There was a time when he was searching for a way to avert the signs of impending doom, and he frequently felt a sense of overwhelming helplessness, as if he couldn't see what lay ahead. But could he call that fear?

Endless torture, the resultant pain, and death might have incited anger and resignation in Yuder, but they never truly instilled a sense of fear in him.

So what about now?

As he considered digging deeper into Kishiar's sleep-talking and the peculiar connection between them, part of him did not want to. Throughout the day, his eyes had repeatedly darted to Kishiar, as if expecting the word 'Yudrain' to suddenly come from his lips, before he quickly averted his gaze.

Come to think of it, the feeling was similar to the hesitation he'd felt before knocking on the bedroom door where Kishiar was, ultimately turning away after much deliberation.

'Well, technically, there's still a door between us, separating the inside from the outside,' Yuder mused.

His eyes briefly shifted toward the office door where Kishiar, alongside the Emperor's agents, was in a meeting, then returned to their original position.

But the weight of the resolve needed to open the door was entirely different now and then. The weight of the secrets that Yuder Aile perceived had significantly increased in the meantime.

Should he open the door?

If he opens it, to what extent should he open it?

Is opening the door the best course of action?

Could the reaction of the person he'll face after opening the door also be considered the best outcome?

Behind these unanswerable questions trailed a slight, irrational impulse to retreat from the situation. He felt strangely powerless, as if caught in a state of limbo between action and inaction.

So perhaps that was what could be considered frightening.

"Yes, there is something that scares me," Yuder slowly replied, organizing his thoughts. Kanna gave a faint smile and nodded.

"Uh-huh, of course. You're human, after all... I guess I just asked a stupid question because the Yuder I've known has always seemed so strong."

"..."

"I won't ask what it is that scares you. But as comrades and friends, it's not strange to say that I want to help if there's something troubling you, right? After all, you've done the same for me."

True to her skill in reading information, Kanna didn't probe into what Yuder was afraid of. She simply whispered her sincere desire to help.

That earnest, yet cautious worry stirred something deep within Yuder's chest.

"Thank you, even if it's just words."

"It's not just words! I really will help you with anything, and I'll believe whatever you say. You've already given me such valuable help, after all!"

Kanna asserted her point, nodding her head emphatically.

"Sure, the Commander and the other comrades have been a big help, but my gratitude toward you is a bit more special. Do you know why?"

Yuder shook his head. Kanna wrinkled her nose as if she had expected as much and smiled. A moment later, a confession came forth, barely loud enough for anyone other than Yuder to hear.

"You see, sometimes when I'm not feeling well, I still dream of the times before I joined the Cavalry. Count Gallon was that terrifying and scary."

As she spat out the name of the person who had treated her not as a child but as a servant, ultimately intending to dispose of her, her brows twitched momentarily. However, she continued speaking with a steadfast expression.

"When you stood up for me in front of Count Gallon, it might have seemed like a small favor to you, but it allowed me to see the world anew. It wasn't just because I realized that what terrified me could be laughable to someone else."

"..."

"Back then, I was afraid that people would find out what scared me. I was terrified at the thought of everyone knowing my secret; I couldn't even sleep. At the moment you confronted Count Gallon, I thought it was all over."

But it wasn't. No one ridiculed or pointed fingers at Kanna for her past fears. Count Gallon had been soundly put in his place, and since then, no one in the Cavalry had dared to speak ill of her about that time.

"So what I want to say, Yuder, is..."

Kanna gently patted the back of his hand, continuing her small smile.

"Being scared is just that, nothing more."

The help Yuder had offered Kanna was minuscule. He had given some advice to a talented individual to join the Cavalry and had gone out of his way to thwart Count Gallon's attempts to waste her skills.

Yet, Kanna hadn't forgotten that event, even after all this time had passed and everything was settled. What seemed inconsequential to Yuder had been a profoundly important and terrifying experience for her. It was only now that Yuder fully realized this.

The weight of her simple words, that "being scared is just that," unexpectedly sank into his heart.

It's just that. No need to agonize trying to find reasons.

"I can't speak for others, but I will never forget the weight of the fear I felt then. And as long as I don't forget, my feelings won't change either."

The back of his hand, held by Kanna, felt unexpectedly warm.

"I won't necessarily ask you to ask for help, but don't carry it all alone. If anyone asks for help, I'll do whatever I can. That goes for Gakane, Sister Ever, Jimmy, Hinn, Finn... Ah! And the Commander as well!"

Yuder silently looked down at his hand and closed his eyes. Suddenly, the sound of Enon's complaints from last night overlaid Kanna's advice, and a smile like a sigh flowed faintly from him.

"... It's reassuring. Thank you."

It wasn't a vow or a pledge, just a word of trust. Yet he couldn't understand why it made him feel so reassured.

Kanna said no more, but patted the back of his hand a few more times before suddenly turning her head.

"Huh? Sir Zuckerman and Robel are here."

Just as she said, Nathan Zuckerman, carrying a box wrapped in cloth, was ascending the stairs right next to the window where they were standing, accompanied by a man and a woman. Robel and Marty, both with slightly tense expressions, spotted Kanna and Yuder and silently signaled their joy.

"Sir Zuckerman! It's good to see you for the first time since the auction day. I'm glad you look well. And Robel as well. Who is this with you?"

"My name is Marty."

"It's my first time meeting you in person. Nice to meet you."

As Kanna greeted them with a bright face, Robel, Marty, and Nathan Zuckerman returned the greeting. Yuder also exchanged greetings, scrutinizing the face of Nathan Zuckerman, whom he had not seen since the party.

He had heard that Zuckerman hadn't given up chasing Nahan even after losing him. But it was hard to guess whether he had been successful or not just by looking at his face.

'He looks perfectly healthy.'

Gone was the forced pretense of a reckless knight; the knight's attire was now more upright and neat than ever before. While others might find such a get-up stifling, he appeared rather more comfortable and free in it.

"So what brings the three of you here?"

"Ah... we didn't come for the same reason. The Duke... no, the Commander, wanted to meet us, so we happened to take the same path when we ran into this knight along the way."

"So, Sir Zuckerman, you're also here to see the Commander?"

Upon Yuder's question, Nathan Zuckerman nodded.

"Yes."

"I see. But the Commander is still in conversation with other visitors, so you'll have to wait a little."

"Understood."

As if he had anticipated this, Nathan Zuckerman was not surprised. He continued up the stairs and took a position near them. Robel and Marty followed cautiously behind him. Kanna, her eyes falling upon the box he carried, asked with undisguised curiosity.

"So, Sir Zuckerman, may I ask what's in the box?"

"The Commander said to bring cookies for his return."

"Cookies...?"

"He said they'd be needed tonight."

Kanna seemed momentarily torn, wondering if this was some sort of code or euphemism, but it appeared to be just the plain and simple truth. Yuder, maintaining his silence, decided to pose a question of his own.

Turning

Chapter 440

"Did your endeavor yield any results?"

The words were phrased cautiously, but the intention was clear: had the pursuit of Nahan been successful?

"Yes."

Nathan Zuckerman replied without a change in expression.

It seemed he had found something significant enough to report to Kishiar, although the extent was unclear. Kanna, who seemed to have grasped the weight of their conversation, was about to speak when the office door opened and the agents exited, thereby cutting off their discussion.

"Hm? Nathan. It's been a while."

The agents outside recognized Nathan Zuckerman and greeted him. As Nathan responded curtly, Kanna whispered quietly.

"Those people seem to be looking at you more than they are at Sir Zuckerman, don't you think?"

"..."

Perhaps Kishiar's words had made a considerable impression on them; a few individuals, including an agent named Melina, cast odd glances at Yuder. Yuder patted Kanna's arm reassuringly and then turned his head toward Robel, Marty, and Nathan.

"Who would like to go in first?"

"My business is not urgent, so please allow these individuals to go before me."

"No, no, we may have been summoned, but it wasn't specified that we should come together. So, let Marty go first..."

Since Nathan Zuckerman and Robel had deferred to each other, naturally Marty took the first turn. Yuder stared at Marty, who kept her lips tightly sealed, and slightly furrowed his brow.

'...What's going on?'

He hadn't noticed when she was sandwiched between Nathan and Robel, but upon a closer look, something about Marty seemed a bit different from before.

It wasn't merely her expression or the atmosphere she exuded.

'It's more like, the color of her hand looks different than usual...'

Could it be a misconception? Yuder observed her as they were led into the office.

Alone and reviewing documents after his discussion with the agents, Kishiar glanced up and greeted them with a bright smile, which even momentarily relaxed Marty, who had been tense.

"My lord."

"Ah, Marty. A few days ago at the party, you and others provided significant aid to the Cavalry. I wanted to express my gratitude on their behalf."

Marty, taken aback, lowered her head in denial.

"No, sir. I didn't do anything so great as to deserve such words."

"If confronting the intruders in the garden isn't considered significant, what is?"

Marty and a few other non-Awakeners had acted as temporary servants at the party to monitor and report any infiltration by Nahan. The reason the damage was minimal—aside from those who died—was that they had personally identified the intruders and provided information to the Cavalry.

In particular, Marty had personally faced them and even engaged in a verbal skirmish. Surprisingly, some of Nahan's colleagues who saw her lost their momentum and were severely shaken, and ultimately fell apart.

Even though they had come this far in compliance with Nahan's will, it wasn't as if they didn't know that neither Marty nor the others were actually guilty of anything. The unexpected sight of their unharmed faces must have been quite unsettling.

That moment of wavering had ultimately been of great help in suppressing them without further casualties.

Recalling that time, a quiet Marty prompted Kishiar to ask.

"But you see, some of the other members who went out with you last time mentioned they sensed something peculiar about you. Do you have anything to say about that?"

For a moment, Yuder saw the same phenomenon occur again over Marty's clenched fists. On the backs of her exposed hands, a vein-like blue and pale hue appeared and momentarily shimmered with a faint energy before subsiding.

Thanks to his intense concentration, he caught this fleeting change. And he was sure.

'Could it be...?'

"Marty, have you awakened?"

At Yuder's question, Marty seemed startled and quickly hid her hands behind her back. Her lips tightly sealed, she anxiously glanced between Kishiar and Yuder, before eventually nodding in admission.

"Yes... you're right. I couldn't hide it from you two."

"So you have. Does Robel Gemson know?"

"Robel... is still unaware."

Marty softly answered Kishiar's question, casting a fleeting glance toward the door behind which Robel might be, and let out a heavy sigh.

Marty explained that she had first sensed an anomaly in her body when they confronted the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran on the day of the party. At first, she didn't know what was happening, but the next day, she realized without having to ask anyone.

She had awakened the ability to temporarily drain the energy of objects she touched.

This power had partially influenced why the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran were suddenly disrupted and couldn't fight properly.

Despite disclosing her status as an Awakener, Marty's expression was far from jubilant. Her complex emotions were apparent from her posture as she clasped her hands behind her back.

"Are you scared of being an Awakener?"

"More than scared... No. Yes, to be honest, I'm frightened."

Though initially hesitant, Marty eventually nodded in agreement.

"I don't know what to do. Once you're awakened... there's no going back, is there?"

"Unfortunately, that seems to be the case for now."

Kishiar gave a brief answer, then made a proposal to the visibly distraught Marty.

"We intended to recognize and assist those who helped with this matter, granting you protection and the right to stay anywhere in the Empire once this is over. But, if you're amenable, I'd like to add another option."

"What's that?"

"How about staying and working at the soon-to-be-established western branch of the Cavalry?"

"The Cavalry?"

The Cavalry's western branch would be responsible for assisting newly awakened individuals in the area they oversee, handling all related matters as a priority. Hearing Kishiar's explanation, Marty's eyes gradually turned serious.

"I think the Cavalry is one of the more comfortable places for awakened individuals. You don't need to make an immediate decision; you can stay until you're ready to choose."

"I appreciate the generous offer... I'd like to consider it more."

"Very well."

Before she left, Kishiar casually imparted a few words.

"While you may find it sad to have become awakened, remember that this isn't the sum total of who you are. Someone will still cherish and love you, awakened or not. I would have made this offer regardless of your status."

"...Thank you."

With a contemplative expression, Marty maintained her silence for a moment, then said her farewells and exited the room.

Robel, who followed in after, looked increasingly tense, perhaps sensing that something was off with Marty's expression. Kishiar extended his gratitude to Robel for his assistance and inquired about his future plans.

"I'm content just seeing Marty again. Although I can't immediately return to how things were with her... I still want to be wherever she is. Ah! Of course, I'll assist with whatever is required of me in the Cavalry."

"You mentioned wanting to find your former comrades. Have you managed that?"

"Yes."

Robel had briefly visited his friends from the Star of Nagran village, who were moderates like himself, to find out about their whereabouts.

"It seems that before causing a major incident, they gathered everyone from my comrades to the villagers and sent them to another location. They didn't tell me where, but I'd like to believe they weren't lying; they are all Awakeners, after all."

"That's fortunate, then."

Kishiar responded evenly, scrutinizing Robel's face before breaking into a smile.

"Robel Gemson. While there are people like you on the Star of Nagran, there are also those like Nahan. I am interested in information about the Star of Nagran, but it's not easily accessible from the outside. You all seem to be very cautious of us."

"Ah... Yes."

Robel answered nervously.

"If you want information from us, I will do my best to provide it, although I know very little. I joined later and spent a brief period in the south before returning to the west; my life has been pretty mundane."

"We can talk about that later. But I would like you to answer one thing first."

"Go ahead."

"What do you think the Star of Nagran is like?"

Robel wore an exceedingly complex expression. His face showed that he was grappling with how to answer. However, it didn't take him long to come to a conclusion.

"When I first visited, the place felt ordinary. It was just a village where people rallied around a sage to protect each other. But now... I'm not sure."