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Despite some hiccups, the celebration party for the Cavalry was quite the talk of the empire, both domestically and internationally. The rare appearance of Emperor Keilusa and the generous rewards he bestowed undoubtedly contributed to the buzz.

Inside the empire, many nobles were not fond of the Cavalry. However, the view from outside was a bit different.

Within less than a year, the Emperor of Orr and his brother had achieved remarkable results by employing Awakeners, whom many had believed to be dangerous aberrations. The Cavalry, predominantly composed of commoners, had demonstrated discipline that rivaled the Imperial Knights and Court Magicians during the Harvest Festival. They also promptly quelled the sudden surge of monsters in the west. Considering the significant losses suffered by the neighboring western countries, Orr had barely lost anything in comparison.

That wasn't all. They even discovered a vein of magic ore in the Great Sarain Forest. While similar veins had been found over the years, none compared in scale to this discovery in the Great Sarain Forest. Rumors began to circulate discreetly that those interested in researching the vein, and those greedy for the rights to exploit it, were showing unprecedented interest in the Cavalry.

This development gave serious cause for concern among the noble factions that had been firmly backing the various lords. If Emperor Keilusa managed to secure this vein properly, he would establish an unparalleled level of influence and support, something they were loath to see. Any attempt to obstruct this would only benefit other nations and disgrace their own empire.

They were caught in a bind. Even trying to get a piece of this pie seemed impossible now, as it was too late. Moreover, the influence of Duke Tain had already waned, as he was too preoccupied with fending off threats and fighting against his own family.

Despite consistent assertions by some high-ranking nobles, including Duke Diarca, that "the vein discovered in the Great Sarain Forest is not as valuable as it seems, and what the Cavalry has done is nothing special compared to others who have served the nation," their arguments were losing steam.

This was because Emperor Keilusa publicly displayed the massive head of Pethuamet, which Yuder had presented.

The ordinary citizens of the empire were simply thrilled by the monumental achievements made by Awakeners who were just ordinary commoners. They were hopeful for the prosperity that the discovery of the massive vein would bring to the west.

Thus, the celebration party for the Cavalry took on even greater significance. People began to recognize individual members of the Cavalry and remember the unique abilities each possessed. News of Yuder receiving the title of Baron became a symbol of upward mobility among those weary of life's struggles, and his interactions at the party were seen as shocking developments among those who heard about them.

And the protagonist of it all, Yuder, was currently riding in a carriage towards the Dawn Palace, where the Empress resided, in the company of Duke Peletta.

"...I hear Baron Durmand is soon retiring to his ancestral lands for recuperation," Yuder looked at Kishiar, who sat leisurely in front of him and spoke.

"It seems he could blame the drugged punch at Quelochet on someone else, but couldn't shake off the shame."

"Indeed."

Baron Durmand woke up after the party only to face ongoing investigations. Thanks to the aid of his close associates, he managed to shift most of the blame onto others who had helped prepare the festivities. Nonetheless, escaping completely unscathed was impossible. It was thanks to Kanna's secretive and persistent investigation into his association with Quilochet, the information of which was relayed to Kishiar.

Certain that no one would discover his secrets, Durmand was shocked to see them revealed from various quarters. Ultimately, he sent an apology letter to the Cavalry, stating, "I swear to God, I didn't know the potion contained forbidden substances, but I acknowledge it was my reckless mistake to bring it as a gift." He also paid a hefty fine. As the intended recipient of the apology remained ambiguous, Yuder found the letter useful as a target in the members' training exercises.

Duke Diarca, who would normally have protected Durmand, openly ignored him this time, making no effort to hide his deep disappointment. When one loses the favor of someone who has been giving support, options tend to dwindle rapidly.

Despite being a distant yet close relative and a friend as intimate as the tongue in one's mouth to Duke Diarca for decades, Durmand found his downfall to be alarmingly quick and easy.

'Perhaps it was all the easier to discard him precisely because he had been such a close associate,' Yuder thought.

Keeping Durmand around served only to maintain the status quo. However, demonstrating that even someone as close as he could be so ruthlessly cast aside was a way to instill a sense of urgency among those around.

'Moreover... making Durmand's punishment so public might also serve as a warning to me and the Cavalry,' Yuder mused.

Reflecting on the behavior of Emperor Katchian and nobles from his past life, the answer came easily. When they couldn't directly chastise the person who had angered them, they would openly punish a subordinate in front of everyone to make their intentions clear. That was their idea of noble conduct.

The Duke would have preferred to ostracize and expel Yuder, but unable to do so, he chose to send a message through Durmand.

'I'm not the least bit intimidated by such warnings; they'd do better to show their hand,' Yuder thought.

Just then, Kishiar asked in a discreet yet significant manner, "If it bothers you that he didn't apologize directly, would you like me to arrange an opportunity? I can fabricate some external affairs on a day when you go down to the fief."

"No, it's fine."

Thinking of Gakane, Yuder wanted nothing more than to give Durmand the most perilous journey home, but the man was too insignificant. It wasn't the time to take the Cavalry away from their many pressing tasks.

Hearing the clean refusal, Kishiar added as if an afterthought, "Should you change your mind, feel free to tell me. Oh, and speaking of the investigation, I found something interesting. It seems related to what you have been researching."

"What is it?"

"It turns out that Baron Durmand was the one who initially introduced the Crown Prince's healers to Duke Diarca. After they cured him of his chronic migraines, he began to trust them deeply."

Yuder's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

"...I see. Thank you for letting me know."

The surveillance activities on the Star of Nagran by the Cavalry's intelligence division, which had begun even before the party, continued. Excluding Yuder, the members each collected information in their own way and took turns keeping watch over the residence where they were staying. Yuder expected that Enon, who had not participated in the rotation, would share information in his own way when the time came.

It was a most opportune time to investigate the surroundings of the man who had first made contact with the Star of Nagran, linking them to Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince. Nobody paid much attention to him these days.

"We've arrived at the Dawn Palace."

Not long after, the carriage came to a stop.

Yuder stepped out and looked up at the Dawn Palace, a place he had scarcely visited even in his previous life. Unlike the Sun Palace, which emanated the aura of an ancient temple with its

immaculately maintained, isolated buildings, the Dawn Palace was a harmonious blend of structures connected by beautiful corridors and bridges, giving off a cheerful yet majestic atmosphere.

"Your Excellency Duke Peletta, welcome."

The chief maid of the Empress, Algorita, who had been waiting for them, bowed her head in a formal greeting. Lifting her head, she began guiding them with a smiling face, informing them that the Empress was expecting them.

"It's good to see your face again."

As they crossed a large pond and entered the Emerald Room, a space where the Empress held formal meetings with guests, she greeted them. Yuder noticed that the clothes she wore seemed oddly familiar. Kishiar seemed to recognize it too, a smile twinkling in his eyes as he spoke.

"Are you wearing the gift I sent?"

"I'd heard these types of clothes are becoming popular, so I grew curious. As it was timely sent by you, Your Excellency, I thought I'd try it on."

"You look absolutely stunning. Even the emeralds in this place could not possibly shine in the face of Your Majesty's beauty and dignity."

"Enough with your jokes. Even in jest, it could be considered an ill omen by those who hear."

"Why the grim words? The god knows the truth in my words, my aide knows it, and even His Majesty at the Sun Palace would vouch for it. Who would see it as an ill omen?"

Finally, the Empress let a smile creep onto her lips, amused by Kishiar's sycophantic charm, which was as playful as the last time they met.

"To be honest, I was a little surprised to hear that you would be coming, considering how busy you seemed to be after the party."

The Empress, who had discreetly requested a meeting with Yuder after the party, had sent an invitation letter not even three days later, just as she had said. In truth, Yuder had also judged that Kishiar was likely too busy to accompany him, but he got into the carriage before Yuder with a very relaxed expression, as if he had never been so busy.

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"You're mistaken if you think I'm too busy. That's not the case at all."

Kishiar grinned with a carefree expression on his face. It was a smile befitting of the idle Duke of Peletta, yet the Empress wasn't fooled by it.

"So, are you saying you didn't accompany Baron Aile just because you didn't want to send him alone?"

"Partly, yes. But I must also add that today's visit presented a splendid opportunity to meet Your Majesty in the Dawn Palace, an opportunity I did not want to miss."

Astoundingly candid as his answer was, the harmony between Kishiar's smiling face and his articulate words managed not to cool the atmosphere in the slightest. Yuder watched Kishiar smoothly converse with the Empress and couldn't help but think how remarkable he was.

In the end, it was the Empress who first conceded.

"Very well. I understand why you're here, so no further explanation is necessary. I'd like to talk with Baron Aile now."

As the Empress snapped her fan closed, Kishiar sealed his lips with a quiet smile.

Yuder sensed that the slight tension he'd felt when he first sat down had long since dissipated. The Empress also appeared more relaxed compared to their initial exchange, as she turned her gaze and began speaking.

"Baron Aile, have you been in good health since the party?"

"Yes, thank you for your concern."

"That's good to hear. I was pleased you accepted the invitation, but I was also concerned we might be burdening the hero of Great Sarain Forest unnecessarily."

The Empress knew why she had to assist Kishiar and Yuder during the party. Only after hearing that Yuder wasn't suffering any aftereffects from Quelochet did she breathe a sigh of relief and offer a subtle smile.

"The reason I wanted to meet you today, Baron, is to hear directly from you about your recent actions. Though the palace is a place where one hears many stories, none compare to hearing the truth directly."

Yuder had a vague idea of what the Empress wanted to know specifically, but he simply answered, "Yes."

"Please feel free to ask me anything you're curious about."

"Alright. Then let's start with your life and journey before joining the Cavalry. I heard you lived deep in the mountains before coming to the capital. What made you decide to do that? Were you already confident you'd pass the Cavalry's entry test?"

'So, we're starting there.'

Yuder took a quiet breath and responded respectfully, though his expression remained unchanged.

"As you mentioned, the place where I lived was a secluded mountain valley, a half-day's travel from the nearest village. After my grandfather passed away, my opportunities to meet other people dwindled, making it hard to gauge my abilities even after my awakening."

The Empress nodded slowly as Yuder continued, mentioning how he had come across recruitment information for the Cavalry and decided to come to the capital out of a desire to test his own abilities.

"When I first saw you, you seemed very well-mannered and remarkably composed, so I was quite surprised to learn your actual age. I've heard you have extensive knowledge of your abilities, enough to teach your fellow members. Did you gain this knowledge through your awakening?"

"Partially, yes, but not entirely. Some of it came from testing my own abilities, but much of it... I had the opportunity to learn from someone else before."

"Did you say you had something to learn from meeting another Awakener?"

"Yes."

Kishiar's gaze met the space just above Yuder's face. Despite sensing it, Yuder did not turn his eyes toward him. After all, Kishiar should already know some of the story, as Yuder had briefly mentioned something similar to his comrades, including Kanna and Gakane, in the Great Sarain Forest.

However, what Kishiar might think upon hearing the story now—given that he had more information and had speculated deeply about Yuder's secrets—was uncertain.

"What sort of person was it? One individual, or multiple?"

"...It was one person."

The Empress seemed to surmise that Yuder had learned various things from another Awakener by fate while living in the mountains. Given that many had abandoned their hometowns to flee to isolated areas or chose a life of wandering after the appearance of the Awakeners, regardless of their social status, her assumption wasn't entirely unfounded.

"If that person was skilled enough to teach the Baron, that person could be of help to the Cavalry as well. Do you still keep in touch?"

"That person is someone I can no longer meet."

There was no notable change in Yuder's expression, but his eyes momentarily darkened. The Empress suspected that the person Yuder spoke of had long been dead, as she detected a distant look in his eyes even as their gazes met.

Instead of directly apologizing for touching upon an uncomfortable memory, she phrased her words carefully.

"I see. It's a pity. However, some relationships carry meaning in the meeting itself. Since you, Baron, have achieved great things here because of that encounter, the whole Empire will be grateful for that relationship."

Yuder blinked, feeling like he was hearing something utterly unfamiliar.

'A relationship the whole Empire will be grateful for.'

Even Kishiar wouldn't think that, given his past life, but it was true that the life he had then has been a great help in this rerun of time. Even so, it felt peculiar.

The Empress then shifted the conversation to what Yuder had accomplished since joining the Cavalry. Starting from the retrieval of the Red Stone to his tasks in the western dispatch and events in Tainu, her range of questions was incredibly wide and unexpectedly insightful.

Just as she had asked about who had taught Yuder, her ability to delve into peculiar details indicated an open-minded and broad way of thinking.

Yet, she did not cross any boundaries that would make her interlocutor uncomfortable. The conversation flowed smoothly, making her appear quite different from the quiet and shy character that was her public image.

'She may be naturally quiet... But that doesn't mean she's unaware of her surroundings. Rather, her ability to grasp information is quite remarkable.'

Like a reed swaying in the wind, she might seem only gentle and modest, but that was not the entirety of the Empress. People like her could be exceptionally strong in certain aspects.

And perhaps, the subject where the Empress could demonstrate her strength would be matters related to Emperor Keilusa.

Just as Yuder had assessed the Empress, she seemed to have similarly assessed him. She looked at Yuder with slightly different eyes now, and posed a question of a somewhat different nature.

"Baron Aile, on a different note... I heard that you shared a rather surprising story when you visited the Sun Palace with the Duke to meet His Majesty, is that so?"

The conviction was clear that this was the most important reason she had summoned Yuder.

"Even after hearing the news, it was hard to be certain if such a thing was really possible. However, personally, it was news that filled me with so much hope that it was hard to keep my heart from racing. His Majesty has acted as if he's never heard such talk since, but... I'm personally curious about your opinion, Baron Aile. Has your opinion remained unchanged, both then and now?"

The Empress knew exactly what had been discussed when Yuder and Kishiar had dined with the Emperor in the Sun Palace. She made no need for explanation about the conversations that had taken place; her eyes shone vividly and desperately, clearly indicating she only wanted to know Yuder's opinion.

Yuder looked at the Empress's tightly clenched lower lip and gave the most cautious and clear answer he had ever given.

"Yes, my opinion has not changed, then or now. Given the opportunity, I intend to act on behalf of His Majesty."

"..."

The fingertips of the Empress, who had been holding a fan, quivered slightly.

"What about the Duke?"

Her gaze moved past Yuder to Kishiar, who had been silently observing the conversation. With a smile that seemed to say he finally had the opportunity to reveal something he was proud of, Kishiar set down the cup he had been holding.

"Of course, my opinion has also not changed. Even if His Majesty ignores what I have previously said, I will never give up and intend to act, along with my assistant."

"I've heard that following Baron Aile's opinion could put the Duke at risk as well. Do you still say the same?"

"Faith does not come when one is afraid of the impossible," Kishiar responded.

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Kishiar's red eyes were unwaveringly calm. It naturally evoked the memory of the day of the party when he had answered, without any hesitation before the Emperor, about who he had danced with. Facing that familiar yet strange face once again, the Empress studied him quietly, with utmost scrutiny.

Kishiar La Orr, who she had thought she knew well, was as complex internally as he was radiant externally. There was always a trace of exhaustion and self-mockery in his eyes. Perhaps it was the physical limitations that even his power could not overcome, and the challenging circumstances around him that even his extraordinary abilities struggled to navigate, that had shaped him this way.

But the calm he exhibited now was different from before, when even impurities seemed to sink deep into an unfathomable lake.

Here was a man who, in planning and executing any scheme, never easily offered full trust or confidence, now showing steadfast belief towards a single person. It was as if he were a fortress that had never crumbled despite facing the weathering of a thousand years.

"I am a living witness who has seen up close how Baron Aile has toppled what was considered impossible," he began. "I can swear without a shadow of a lie, having tested the possibility of success with my own body. Please, Your Highness, trust him as you would trust me."

"..."

"And please, offer your assistance."

The Empress remained silent for a long time. Finally, when she spoke again, her eyes were slightly moist.

"I assume you already know that His Majesty broke years of seclusion to emerge for the Cavalry, and that it was solely for the Duke. It seems he has already excluded himself from future plans, contemplating ways to leave more for the Duke and the Cavalry."

The Empress encapsulated the deepest thoughts of the Emperor more profoundly than Kishiar could.

"Among those plans is appointing the Duke as the Crown Prince based on the strength that the Cavalry will gain. Are you aware of this?"

'Crown Prince Kishiar?'

Since returning from the west, the Emperor's actions clearly indicated that he was strengthening the Cavalry and Kishiar. But Crown Prince? It was a startling revelation, something that could never have happened in a previous life.

Yuder involuntarily turned his gaze towards Kishiar. The man, showing no trace of a smile, quietly responded.

"This is the first time I've heard of it. But aren't Your Majesties the ones who know best that I have long been Duke Peletta?"

"Knowing doesn't mean we can just let go and surrender. Although it might be impossible by imperial law, His Majesty has been searching for a way to make it happen for quite some time. And I did not stop him."

"..."

"After our child left us and His Majesty became as he is, the Duke became the only remaining precious hope for both of us. We searched every way to heal His Majesty and were prepared to do anything. But if achieving that carries the risk of losing our last remaining hope... it's not a decision anyone can make easily. I understand more deeply than anyone why His Majesty hesitated."

Under normal circumstances, Yuder would have rejected the hope presented just as the Emperor had. However, the look in the Empress's eyes, her heart, spoke a different truth.

"The Duke really is... not afraid of anything, is he?"

Though she didn't explicitly say what the fear was, the multiple meanings contained in her voice were clear.

"And what about you, Baron Aile? Do you feel the same?"

Her gaze now shifted to Yuder.

Yuder wasn't afraid of striving to save the Emperor. There was no need to be afraid of things that obviously needed to be done. Dancing with Kishiar, or any potential consequences of that, held no meaning for him. Even if the Emperor and Empress couldn't trust him in the end and sought to distance

him from the Cavalry and Kishiar, it would be the same. Gender, social status, and the immediate opposition and skepticism couldn't deter Yuder's intentions.

However, if there was something that might qualify as fear for him, it was the concern that some problems might arise for Kishiar La Orr during the process.

And that sole exception seemed already to know what Yuder was thinking, quietly sending him a gaze.

Detaching his eyes from Kishiar, Yuder spoke first.

"Your Highness, I fully understand your concerns. However, knowing that I have the power to help His Majesty the Emperor, I do not wish to step back out of fear."

"You're that confident? Even though this has never been achieved before? You're not afraid of what comes after a potential failure?"

The Empress added weight to her voice for the first time. The atmosphere grew so intense that most people would instantly back off. But Yuder was not the least bit intimidated by the vexation she seemed to deliberately project.

"Yes. If I have to be blunt, the regret of not even trying would be a far greater regret for me."

The Empress's eyes flickered. Yuder met her gaze directly as he spoke.

"This is not boasting, but I am confident that no one can do better than me in matters related to the power of the Awakener. Even if you find my words inadequate, please believe just that. It's the most solid proof I can offer to Your Highness."

"..."

"Please, give us a chance."

"Yes, I share the same sentiment."

Finally, Kishiar quietly agreed with a smile.

The Empress let out a breath that seemed like a sigh.

The tension left her eyes, and a sad smile adorned her face.

"You're someone who makes all the worries before meeting you meaningless."

"..."

"Alright. I'll help."

The Empress finally promised her assistance. She seemed stronger than anyone else as she pledged to provide an opportunity for treating the Emperor, despite not holding significant political or social influence.

"I will make sure the opportunity you need, Baron, will be provided. Until then, Duke, please prepare with the Baron to make sure this precious endeavor doesn't fail. If you need anything for the preparations, feel free to ask. And... before the final trial, please pay a visit here so I can also directly experience the process and results."

"Isn't that a risky suggestion? Just receiving your help would be enough to incur great wrath. Adding a trial on top of it would make me more afraid of the consequences, to be honest..."

Kishiar slightly furrowed his brows as he smiled. However, the Empress did not smile back.

...

"Of course, the risk is not yours alone to bear. I won't send you to His Majesty without verifying the process myself."

"Yes, understood."

At Yuder's reply, the Empress nodded.

"I'm glad you are certain, Baron Aile. Now I see why the Duke values you so much."

"..."

"I trust you."

The Empress promised to persuade the Emperor as soon as possible. Before leaving, Yuder planned to demonstrate his method of enhancing internal energy using the power of the Red Stone in front of Kishiar and her.

In the middle of the reception room, from which even the maids had been sent away, Kishiar lay down comfortably, and Yuder sat in front of him, placing his hand above Kishiar's abdomen. As he took off his gloves, the deep red veins on his hands briefly startled the Empress, but she quickly composed herself.

"I can sense the energy of the Awakener within a person by touching them. After becoming accustomed to the power of the Red Stone, I was able to go further and manipulate that energy."

After briefly explaining, Yuder closed his eyes. A moment later, his palms warmed, and he felt the presence of the Awakener energy within Kishiar's body, protecting him as it always had.

Taking a deep breath, he began to draw upon the power of the Red Stone to unlock Kishiar's internal energy. As he did, energy flowed out of him, and a soft breeze began to circulate, sweat forming on his forehead.

Moments later, an array of colored energy emerged above Kishiar.

"Ah..."

"Do you see?"

"Is this really..."

The Empress could hardly continue her sentence as she stared in awe at the spectacle before her.

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The energy of four distinct colors seemed to be alive, swirling around in unique patterns. The sight was both terrifying and mystical.

"Does it... hurt?"

"No, I'm perfectly fine. But I must admit, I feel a bit embarrassed revealing myself like this in front of Your Majesty the Empress."

The Empress's unease quickly dissipated, thanks to Kishiar's words, which somehow seemed even more awkward than when he had strolled barefoot around Tainu's party. Nonetheless, the overwhelming sensation she felt from simply watching remained.

"Does Baron Aile know which color represents which energy?"

"Of course."

Yuder proceeded to explain the colors and locations of each energy, saving the red energy that cautiously moved along his hand for last.

"And this is the energy of the Awakener. While the energy in most people is usually located below the abdomen, Commander's energy moves in a form that not only fills the vessel but also envelops and protects the surrounding force. This differentiates him from other Awakeners."

"I see. The vessel..."

The Empress's gaze shifted towards the massive conglomerate of energy that seemed lodged at his core. Long-standing emotions were revealed in her eyes as she looked at the red energy that solidly enveloped and supported the turbulent vortex. Seeing the actual entity causing suffering and leading her husband, the Emperor, towards death did nothing to uplift her mood.

Yuder ignored her expression and continued to explain his earlier attempts. The Empress's expression returned to normal upon hearing that he had successfully drawn his energy into Kishiar's body using his abilities.

"Truly remarkable."

"Then I shall conclude the demonstration here."

The light faded from Yuder's hand, and everything vanished as if it had been an illusion. Kishiar sat up and smiled.

"It feels like I've grown more accustomed to controlling it over time. The strain on my end also seems to have lessened. Are you alright?"

"I am fine, fortunately."

"You might be fine, but it must have drained you. Here, have something to eat."

Kishiar casually handed Yuder a bite-sized snack. Coincidentally, it was the last one left. Yuder hesitated momentarily, but the Empress, still lost in the lingering awe of what she had just seen, was not watching them.

"..."

"Don't worry. It's very delicious with the chocolate. You haven't eaten at all while talking, have you? Go ahead."

Just as Yuder succumbed to Kishiar's tempting whisper and put the snack in his mouth, the Empress abruptly looked up. After an awkward exchange of glances in silence, she finally spoke.

"You don't have to sneak food. I brought it for both of you to share."

"Sneak? I openly offered it out of concern for my assistant, who seemed drained."

Kishiar feigned ignorance effortlessly.

"In that case, will one suffice? Would you like to fetch the next plate for you yourself?"

Since the maids who usually perform such duties were outside while they were demonstrating their abilities, only the three of them were left in the reception room. Kishiar rose gracefully from his seat, wearing a sly smile.

"Of all the commands I have received from Her Majesty today, this is the one I was hoping least to hear."

He lifted the empty plate with the tips of his fingers at a perfect angle, stood up straight, and walked away without making a sound. His posture was so impeccable that Yuder briefly questioned his eyes; if not for his appearance, one might have believed him to be a servant from any palace.

"The Duke has always been able to disguise himself as any rank of palace official if he puts his mind to it. You probably won't find another imperial family member who can mimic a servant so perfectly in all of Orr's history," the Empress said with a faint smile and a sigh, almost immediately after they were left alone. Her voice carried a sense of familial warmth that was different from the Emperor's. It was the voice of someone who had spent a long time with Kishiar, her real family in many ways.

"In truth, there are matters I wish to discuss alone with you, Baron. I temporarily dismissed the Duke for that reason. Is that alright?"

"Yes, of course."

Kishiar had probably departed so obediently because he already suspected the Empress's intentions.

The Empress looked into Yuder's face for a moment as if selecting her words, then seemed to make up her mind.

"Baron, the truth is, my background is quite flawed. Officially, I am recorded as the second child and first daughter of the Duke of Herne, but that record only dates back to when I was 12. Do you understand what that means?"

A person who was recorded as a child of the Duke's family at 12 years old—that was simple enough to understand. It meant that the Empress was adopted into the Duke's family quite late.

'I hadn't known that before.'

The Empress continued her story with a faint smile, noting Yuder's composed expression.

"The Herne family is renowned for their scarcity of daughters. For decades, they hadn't even produced a single Empress because daughters were so rare. I was adopted from a distant branch of the Herne family because I had a slight talent for magic, to fill the symbolic position of a potential Empress Consort. No one thought that I would actually stand where I am now. Even the Herne family didn't wish for such an outcome."

A shadow flickered over her cold yet candid expression.

"From then until now, the only ones who have stood by me are His Majesty and the Duke of Peletta."

The weight of her words was enormously heavy.

"No matter how much you've shared about yourself, Baron, I find it difficult to form a full judgment about you. Perhaps it's because I sense that what you possess is not solely comprised of what you've shown."

Yuder's heart raced a little faster than usual.

"Nonetheless, I have felt the Duke's reason for choosing you, and I've felt the sincerity of your loyalty to His Majesty. That is enough for me to accept you."

"..."

"So, the reason for this rather dull conversation is to ask if you have the confidence to walk a path like mine—or even a more difficult one. Right now, everything might seem smooth, but life is rarely so accommodating."

The Empress posed her final question with a palpable certainty in her voice.

"Do you have the confidence to stand by the Duke's side, even then?"

The question came more from Kishiar's family than from the Empress of the Empire. What answer should he give? Yuder closed his mouth, lost in thought.

Initially, his mind had flitted through exemplary answers that were as apolitical as possible. But seeing the calm yet anxiously honest emotion in the Empress's eyes, those thoughts gradually faded away.

He had no desire to offer such a candid answer to someone who was willing to reveal their own weaknesses and faults just to hear it.

"Any answer I give you will likely not bring you much comfort," he said cautiously. "However, there is one thing I can say."

"And what would that be?"

"I want to be part of the Empire's future that the Commander envisions. That's why I've come this far, and for that cause, I'm willing to do whatever it takes."

"..."

"Without him, there is no future that I desire."

For a moment, the Empress felt an indescribable shiver at his brief statement. A chilling sensation flowed down her spine, rendering her incapable of any thought.

The weight in his seemingly emotionless voice felt prophetic.

It was stifling, the sense of something unspeakable contained within his words, something she could not begin to guess at.

Staring into his eyes, dark as the depths, the Empress found herself speechless for a long while.

"I've brought new refreshments, and the tea has been freshly brewed. The chief maid is asking if she may enter now," said Kishiar as he returned, pushing a small cart adorned with silver. Only then did the Empress regain her composure. Instead of answering whether the maid could come in, she quietly observed the two men seated before her.

"Your Grace."

"Yes."

"You've brought a most remarkable assistant."

"Is that suddenly a revelation?"

Despite the cryptic conversation they'd just had, Kishiar only chuckled casually. The Empress gave a small, relieved smile. Strangely, she felt more at ease.

"Before I go, I'd like to share some news that came through Herne's family intelligence network. While it may not concern His Majesty directly, it could be relevant to the Cavalry, so it may be of use."

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As soon as she handed him the small note, a sharp glint flashed across Kishiar's eyes. The atmosphere among the three was incomparably more amiable than before as they enjoyed the newly brewed tea and refreshments. The only awkward moment arose when Kishiar began to more openly offer Yuder some refreshments, which was far more fruitful than anticipated, except for that slight awkwardness.

As they prepared to leave, the Empress looked far more at ease than when they'd first met and made a suggestion to Yuder.

"Since it seems we will be seeing each other often from now on, may I address you more informally in the future?"

"Of course, you may even call me by my first name."

Being referred to by his title of 'Baron' every time was fitting as a sign of respect for Yuder's achievements, but it also lacked intimacy. Yuder felt it would be better to be addressed with a term of endearment or even by his first name.

At Yuder's response, a soft smile bloomed on one of the Empress's cheeks. As a parting gift, she gave each of them a small present.

"It's nothing much, but please take these sachets of dried flowers that I personally grew."

The gift looked surprisingly humble for something from the Empress of the Empire. However, the fact that she had grown and prepared them herself made it an incomparably precious gift.

"I'm not sure if I'm worthy to accept such a valuable item..."

"It's no trouble at all. My magic powers may be meager, but they prove quite useful when growing plants. Keeping it beside you while sleeping will help you relax and have good dreams."

Eventually, Yuder left the Dawn Palace with the sachet tucked safely in his pocket.

On the way back, Kishiar asked Yuder if anything had been uncomfortable during their visit to the palace. Yuder expressed some concern over learning too much about the Empress's background, to which Kishiar shook his head with a smile.

"There's no problem. She would have only mentioned it if she deemed it okay."

The fact that the Empress wasn't born into the Ducal family, but was adopted, was widely known. Ever since the daughterless Herne family had adopted her as a temporary measure, planning to later transfer power to candidates from other families, there had been much turmoil behind the scenes.

Kishiar, who had watched it all unfold back then, shared the story lightly with Yuder, realizing how much time had passed since those events.

He had seen the Empress endure being considered a thorn in the Herne family's side, suffering yet ultimately acting for the Emperor's benefit.

Despite the snickers of many in high society, who saw the Empress as a lackluster and unnoticeable shadow, she had been a longtime ally, expertly suppressing the ambitions of the Herne family, one of the four Ducal houses, and staunchly remaining at the Emperor's side.

"People say she rose to her current position because of her thirst for glory. But the truth is, she wanted nothing more than to be by His Majesty the Emperor's side. No one believes it, though."

"That's incredible."

"Truly sublime," Kishiar agreed.

"In the past, every time I saw them, I would ponder emotions that I believed I would never understand in my lifetime. But on your way to get new refreshments today, it suddenly struck me... I already know what those emotions are."

Intriguing, isn't it? Kishiar smiled as he gently tapped Yuder's cheek. Yuder sensed the warmth that would follow but did not shy away.

For reasons he couldn't fathom, it felt as though a slight ache tingled inside his throat...

After a lingering kiss, Kishiar skillfully drew Yuder into his arms and finally unfolded the note he had received from the Empress. A brief flicker of sharpness crossed his red eyes, a sharpness he had not shown in front of the Empress, as he skimmed over the small encrypted text.

"What does it say?"

"It's news related to House Diarca. It seems they suspect the possibility of internal spies following this party."

The Duke of Diarca began scrutinizing his long-standing aides anew and revealed his intention to partially replace the mercenaries owned by his house. On the surface, he said he would bring about change by reorganizing the local security forces, but Kishiar interpreted his intentions differently.

"Judging by the fact that House Diarca's people are discreetly contacting Awakened mercenaries and adventurers, it's clear that the power of the Cavalry has impressed them. Additionally, it seems they're looking for the knight who left a new mark on the Emperor Sword Mark."

Kishiar chuckled as if finding the matter amusing, but Yuder didn't find it funny at all. When all the information came together, there was only one thing he could deduce.

Duke Diarca had decided to abandon his previous complacency and gather new strength.

If he was willing to extend his hand so openly to the Awakeners he had always despised, would that outreach only move outward?

"No."

Yuder spoke, furrowing his brows.

"Is there any talk of reaching into the Cavalry?"

"There was no such mention, but the possibility certainly exists."

If there were already verified talents close at hand, the easiest and simplest thing would be to buy them out or draw them to one's side. If Yuder knew the nobles, they would naturally think this way, and he had been subjected to similar situations in his past life.

'Once newcomers are nurtured to a certain point, about three out of ten always disappear, bought out by those offering more money.'

If the Cavalry was still a small group as it was now, it was possible to address and manage everyone's grievances. However, the larger the group became, the harder that was to do.

It was fortunate if those who were bought out left quietly. Some had grievances with Yuder and had sold off confidential information and data from the Cavalry.

While the initial members were all alive and felt a strong camaraderie and sense of belonging to the Cavalry, one could never be too sure.

"I don't want to suspect my comrades, but I'll ask Kanna to prepare for any eventuality."

"Frankly, I think the ones who'd turn their eyes white to take you away are the real problem."

Kishiar grinned and tilted his head.

"Do you have any idea how many requests and invitations to meet Baron Yuder Aile poured in after the party? If I exaggerated a bit, we could've used them as fuel for the fireplace."

"I didn't hear anything about that."

"That's because I sorted them all out before my assistant even saw them."

The man, who couldn't decide if he was joking or serious about how hard the task was, soon looked at Yuder with a much more serious expression.

"Just be cautious, especially with those who are not satisfied with just written communication and bother you in person."

"Yes."

Yuder responded without argument, even if those people would serve at best as post-meal exercise. The man who had been absentmindedly stroking Yuder's hair inspected the back of the note thoroughly, then crumpled it into a ball and turned it to ash.

"The last piece of information written on the note suggests that a significant disturbance occurred within Nelarn a few days ago. I haven't received any detailed information yet, but it seems news has arrived quickly due to our connection with that side."

"Is it a fight among the princes?"

Had the moment they had long anticipated finally come now that Prince Ejain had safely arrived in Nelarn? At Yuder's question, Kishiar nodded silently.

"It seems so."

"..."

"Are you worried about Prince Ejain?"

"No."

Yuder answered briefly and elaborated.

"Before heading to Great Sarain Forest, I might have been concerned. But since his awakening, there's likely no one there who could be his match. It would be better to think about the situation after his victory."

"You're so certain, even though you haven't witnessed the prince's Awakener power yourself?"

It was natural for Yuder to be confident about Ejain's victory, having seen his abilities in a previous life. However, he had not witnessed the prince's current Awakener power, so Kishiar's question was well-placed. Yuder paused for a moment before speaking.

"It's because I have an idea of the potential of the prince's Awakener abilities."

"You speculate on the potential of his abilities... huh."

Kishiar repeated Yuder's words.

"Is that knowledge something you learned from the Awakener who taught you much, or is it the result of your own acquired experiences?"

Caught off guard by the unexpected probing question, Yuder found himself momentarily speechless.

As Yuder hesitated, a man lightly pressed his lips against the top of his head, as if to say there was no need for embarrassment, and then tenderly traced his fingers down to his earlobe.

"You don't have to answer if you're uncertain. But... yes, I also firmly agree that Prince Ejain will be the victor in Nelarn. We'll know more when we get further details, but along with the relics that should arrive from Nelarn soon, it seems we can expect good results."

Turning

Chapter 526

The thoughts and feelings that lay within Kishiar were inscrutable, but at least the touch of his hand as he caressed Yuder's hair remained consistently gentle. Yuder felt his anxiety dissipate surprisingly quickly under that touch.

Hesitating for a moment, he finally spoke with composure.

"You said I didn't have to answer, but... I will. The reason I could speculate on the prince's potential, Your Highness, is closely tied to experience. The person who taught me many things never explicitly instructed me in such matters."

It felt oddly peculiar to talk about Kishiar from his past life as if he were someone else, especially when Yuder knew both the Kishiar of then and now were one and the same. More so since Kishiar himself would be unaware of this.

Kishiar, who had been fondling Yuder's hair, paused and blinked.

"I see. Very well."

"For more details about that, I'm not quite sure how to explain at the moment... so I will stop here. I apologize."

"That's fine. Your answer has given me food for thought."

Kishiar readily responded.

"Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"Hmm. Curious."

Yuder sensed Kishiar's gaze scanning his face, as if sketching his expressions. A moment later, the corners of Kishiar's lips lifted faintly.

"Well, even after all this consideration, there's one particular thing that's both difficult and intriguing to ascertain through mere speculation."

"What is it?"

His thick golden eyebrows, which maintained a pleasing balance above his forehead, shifted ever so slightly. The tranquil atmosphere around Kishiar suddenly changed direction.

"Was my assistant truly alright speaking about someone he can't currently meet?"

Whether he was happy, sad, angry, or even emotionless, Yuder couldn't utter a word in the face of Kishiar's question that solely focused on his well-being.

It was always this way. Yuder found it impossible to predict Kishiar's responses.

There were countless questions that could be raised from the scattered words, but what Kishiar was genuinely curious about was simply Yuder himself. Just him.

As if nothing else mattered.

As if all other conjectures and questions had never existed in the first place.

"..."

In the midst of a sensation akin to being pricked by a needle and emotions he couldn't even name, all Yuder could muster was a single statement.

"Yes. Of course... I am fine."

Kishiar's fingers brushed Yuder's head instead of a verbal reply. Wordlessly, they continued to share warmth until they reached their destination.

Finally, as they arrived at the headquarters of the Cavalry and their entwined arms separated, Yuder felt the chill of the sudden coldness that took its place.

He knew this fleeting confusion of senses would soon vanish, that the chill he felt when alone was the norm. Yet, inexplicably, Yuder felt a fleeting pang of pain at that moment. It was utterly astonishing.

He had never felt the cold as a source of discomfort while living alone for an extended period in a mountain battered by harsh winds all day. Yet, the mere loss of another's warmth could cause such pain. It was a reality he had never before realized.

From the day he had impulsively begun to desire Kishiar, this blind sentiment had grown uncontrollably deeper. And just how far would this change lead him?

It seemed strange that one could yearn so intensely for something even more profound when already bound so closely—both physically and emotionally—as if woven together by a thread.

For the first time, Yuder found himself afraid of the excessive heat of an emotion he had never felt the need nor the ability to name.

...

"Uh-huh. So, you're saying... I should occasionally check around the members of the Cavalry using my abilities to see if the Diarca Duchy or any other nobles have ulterior motives for getting involved? Is this the only favor you're asking?"

"Yes."

"That doesn't sound too hard! I'll do it when I have time."

After meeting with the Empress, Yuder went to Kanna as he had intended and requested that she keep an eye on those around them. This was the first proper conversation they had had since the party, as both had been occupied with their respective duties. Kanna still didn't come too close to him, but her demeanor had improved significantly compared to before the party.

"If it becomes too difficult, don't push yourself. Just stop and let me know."

"It should be fine. I've been training really, really hard these days to control my abilities. I've practiced prioritizing essential information, so this will be a good test."

"Is that because of me?"

"..."

Kanna smiled awkwardly in the silence. There was no answer, but her silence was affirmation enough.

"I've been curious because I didn't get to hear properly before... what exactly did you read from me?"

Exhaling deeply, Yuder asked earnestly. He wasn't overly concerned, judging by what he had heard before; it didn't seem like she had read anything about his past life. Nonetheless, he didn't want to be the reason for her struggle.

"Uh... would it be okay if I didn't say?"

"Why?"

"Well... people say that to maintain a good relationship for a long time, it's important to keep a certain distance. Since this happened due to my lack of control, it's better to bury it and move on rather than make both of us uncomfortable... that's what I thought."

That Kanna would suggest moving on without discussing it indicated just how sensitive the issue must be.

Upon noticing Kanna's cheeks growing increasingly flushed as the topic progressed, Yuder decided it would be best to postpone uncovering the truth behind the matter.

"Fine. If it's that uncomfortable for you, we'll move on for now. But since this also involves me, I'll need to know eventually. You can't just bury it and move on alone."

"Ah, right! By the way, did anything happen when you visited the Empress yesterday? I wanted to ask that first but completely forgot. Silly me."

Kanna awkwardly and abruptly shifted the topic.

Gently looking at her, Yuder obliged her with an answer.

"Nothing special happened."

"Did she not call you to reprimand you for what happened at the party?"

It seemed like Kanna was harboring the suspicion that the Empress had summoned Yuder to scold him for the events at the party.

"She didn't mention that day at all."

"Then what did you discuss?"

"She was curious about what I'd been up to before and after joining the Cavalry, so I told her."

There were also discussions about the Emperor's health and about Kishiar, but those were subjects he couldn't share with Kanna. Instead, Yuder glossed over those details with a simple statement.

"Having the Commander with me meant I hardly had to speak."

"...Ah, ah, I see. So, it wasn't just you; the Commander was with you as well... Discussing you..."

"Discussing me among other things."

"Other things..."

For some reason, Kanna's words dwindled sharply. To reassure her, Yuder mentioned that he had also received a small gift from the Empress. Naturally, what came to mind next was the most striking part of the conversation he had with the Empress and Kishiar that day.

'Imperial Heir.'

In an era where many things were changing rapidly, it was crucial who would lead the nation. Nelarn, who had the opportunity to grow faster by obtaining a faster-winning Heir than in his previous life, was a prime example.

'It took less than five years for Nelarn to dominate the small countries in the west in my previous life. Things can only be the same or better now, as no disasters have occurred yet.'

It was welcome news that Emperor Keilusa seemed to be considering switching his successor from Katchian to Kishiar, at least from the standpoint of someone who had already seen the future. But what about Kishiar himself?

When he heard those words, Kishiar did not make his intentions clear and moved on. However, the response that questioned whether he was no longer the Duke of Peletta could be interpreted as leaning more towards denial than affirmation.

But if Kishiar were open to becoming the Imperial Heir...

If the day comes when he wishes for it...

Ejain, who had survived tough times, enduring attacks from his late father and his brothers, eventually succeeded in toppling all of his siblings and seized the throne. Would it be more difficult for Kishiar to become the Imperial Heir?

'If we proceed with Katchian and Diarca unharmed, there could be a situation close to civil unrest...'

It was not impossible if laws were ignored and only brute force was applied. That was Yuder's assessment. However, there was an important point missing.

The path of change shown by Kishiar and Emperor Keilusa may seem frustrating, but for the most part, they chose methods that would cause the least amount of bloodshed among ordinary imperial citizens.

By that standard, the just-considered approach of ignoring the law and pushing through with force alone was impossible.

'Victories obtained through bloodshed are hard to recognize. If you're prepared to see the opponent's blood, you must also be prepared to shed your own.'

Yuder's eyes, which had turned cold for a moment, returned to their usual state. Ultimately, what was most important to him was Kishiar's own will. There was no need to jump ahead now.

Turning

Chapter 527

"Yuder, so there's nothing more you need from me now?"

Lost in thought, Yuder lifted his head at the sound of Kanna's cautious voice.

"No, there isn't."

"What's next, then?"

"I plan to meet Gakane and Devran in a bit, but there's no urgent need to see them right now. Why?"

Upon hearing his reply, Kanna's eyes widened, as if she had just realized something. "Ah."

"So those two are up to something lately, right? It seemed like they were investigating something, but they haven't told anyone else, so I've been curious. Is it a mission you're involved with too, Yuder?"

"Something like that. How did you know?"

"I knew it! It's definitely not because my abilities suddenly acted up or anything like that! Gakane has been looking a bit gloomy lately, and as I observed, I noticed something different. I only just found out you were involved, too."

As always, Kanna was sharp without even having to use her abilities.

'Ever and Steiber seems to have not been caught on so far... Avoiding Kanna as well would have been difficult.'

It wasn't strictly necessary to keep secret from their immediate superiors that a new intelligence unit had been established within the Cavalry or what investigative mission they were carrying out. However, part of their role moving forward would be to ensure that even perceptive people like Kanna wouldn't notice anything.

'There's a significant difference between not hiding something we could have and failing to hide something we tried to.'

Still, it wasn't bad for a first attempt, as the names of the Eldore siblings hadn't come up. Had they been implicated, Kanna, who had been on a mission with them in the West, would have easily figured out what they were up to.

Yuder decided that he needed to inform his intelligence colleagues of Kanna's discovery, and he openly explained their current mission to her.

"It's not an assignment from the Commander. There's something I personally want to investigate, and I'm doing it with Finn and Hinn as well."

"Ah, is it that thing Hinn and Gakane were really looking forward to in the West?"

"Yes."

"I hadn't noticed anything different with Hinn and Finn. So they've finally started, huh?"

Kanna seemed a little disappointed that she hadn't figured it out, but she didn't forget her primary responsibilities as Deputy Commander. Even if she added her current duties to her role, she'd be overwhelmed even if she had three bodies.

"If you ever need my help, feel free to ask!"

"Will do. But why did you ask if I was busy earlier?"

"Ah, right. Lost my train of thought there."

Kanna blinked her eyes and looked around.

"Yesterday, while Hosanna was awake, he requested a meeting with Gayle and Doyle. I think it should be fine, but I thought you should come along just in case."

"Hosanna?"

"Yes, he usually wakes up around the same time, so he should be waking up soon."

After Hosanna had finally opened his eyes, Yuder had strictly limited who could be around him and had entrusted Kanna with overseeing him. During the time when everyone else was preoccupied with party preparations, Kanna had been juggling her time between Hosanna, Gayle, and the Doyle brothers, reading information from them.

The Doyle brothers would occasionally ask for something from Kanna or other members, but Hosanna spent most of his day still asleep while never letting his guard down. That he had agreed to meet was likely due to Kanna's warm and engaging personality.

'I was planning to probe the three of them about the "Sage" currently in the capital anyway. This works out well.'

"Alright, I'll go with you. But about the favor you said you could do for me earlier—can I ask for it now?"

"Huh? What is it?"

Kanna looked at Yuder with cautious yet curious eyes.

The brothers, who had been eating fruit behind the Cavalry canteen, were startled almost to the point of fainting when Yuder suddenly appeared. However, they calmed down after hearing Kanna's explanation.

"So, Hosanna really called for us?"

"Is it really okay to meet him?"

"It's fine if Yuder says it's fine. Just don't forget that Hosanna is still not well."

"Of course!"

The brothers quickly washed their fruit-sticky hands and followed the two.

"Is the person inside awake?"

Upon reaching the room where Hosanna was staying, Kanna asked the guard who was standing watch. Kanna had entrusted Hosanna to Yuder a short while ago to go eat some snacks. In her absence, Hosanna had woken up, making it difficult for Kanna to ever escape guard duty.

He looked up at Yuder with a momentary sad expression and then nodded.

"Yes, it seems he just woke up... Priestess Lusan is in there with him."

"Got it. I'll go in first to explain, so everyone just wait here for a bit."

Understanding why she was saying that, Kanna patted Yuder's shoulder consolingly and went into the room first. Yuder felt the glances from the brothers but ignored them.

A moment later, Kanna poked her head back out.

"Hosanna's condition is stable. Come in."

On Hosanna's wrist was a cloth strap, still tied gently. Lusan, who was observing his condition, greeted them with a faint smile. Yuder requested that she step out for a moment.

As soon as the young priestess left, Gayle and Doyle rushed toward the bed where Hosanna was lying.

"Hosanna!"

"What happened to you? Where are you hurt?"

"..."

Although Hosanna's face looked better than when he first woke up, it was still incredibly pale in comparison to before. He struggled just to sit up; how long it would take for him to be able to walk was uncertain.

The gaunt young man from the south exhaled a thin breath, his eyes filled with guilt as he looked at the brothers.

"...I'm glad you're well. That's fortunate."

"Yeah, yeah, fortunate or not, we're doing fine here so even last ti— Ow!"

Doyle jabbed Gayle in the side as he began to carelessly mention the past.

"Ouch, why'd you hit me?"

Forgetting they were there to see a patient, the brothers started squabbling among themselves. They only quieted down when their eyes met Yuder's. Whether it was difficult to discuss anything more than pleasantries in front of the Cavalry member or not, they were visibly uncomfortable. Yet, knowing that he was alive seemed to lighten their expressions.

Yuder opened his mouth to Hosanna, who was quite quiet considering he had first requested to meet the brothers.

"Hosanna. Did you not want to tell Gayle and Doyle something?"

"I just wanted to... make sure they were alright."

Hosanna muttered, avoiding eye contact. His voice was faint but noticeably stronger and clearer than before. He had a slight accent in his Imperial language.

"See, they've been doing well. If it hadn't been for you and Nahan, they might have been released by now, not confined within the Cavalry. It's regrettable."

"..."

Hosanna suddenly looked up, surprised. Gayle and Doyle were equally shocked.

"What? What did you say?"

"You were planning to let us go?"

"I've completed all the necessary investigations, and since you guys haven't committed any direct crimes, there's no reason to keep you here any longer."

"So then..."

"Rest assured. What Yuder meant is that it's difficult to do so right now. We're not asking you to leave abruptly. If you want to continue working here and getting paid, you can do so formally. It's better for both Gayle and Doyle, isn't it? Hadn't you said you wanted to do that before?"

As Kanna interjected and skillfully calmed the situation, Gayle and Doyle's expressions, previously filled with anxiety and doubt, quickly brightened.

"Ah... I see. Of course, that's fine then..."

"The reason you're staying here now is because we've judged your situation to be too dangerous. We're keeping you here for your protection."

"Because of Hosanna?"

"That, and there have been some suspicious activities reported in the capital recently."

"Suspicious... activities? Did Nahan cause another uproar?"

"No. He's untraceable at the moment, starting from the west and continuing until now."

Before coming here, thanks to the brothers who asked questions as Yuder had expected, Hosanna finally revealed a somewhat honest reaction.

"So, you're saying Nahan... has not been captured yet?"

"That's correct."

"..."

Hosanna did not question the truthfulness of this statement, which meant that he had built considerable trust in Kanna. Yuder quickly read the emotions that flickered across his face.

Relief, worry, and several other indistinguishable emotions mixed in his expression. He was genuinely concerned about Nahan.

'That guy ran away the moment he knew he failed in his mission, instead of trying to save him.'

"So if it's not Nahan, what exactly are these suspicious activities?"

"We've had multiple sightings of unidentified Awakeners. We think these individuals might belong to the same place as you do."

"What? Did they come to rescue Hosanna and us...?"

"I highly doubt that."

Yuder interjected, causing the brothers to flinch simultaneously.

"Because those who've appeared in the capital are showing no interest in our area. They're only in contact with the nobles."

"Nobles? No one among us is mingling with nobles..."

The brothers' expressions grew puzzled; they couldn't even guess who these mysterious people might be.

"So does Hosanna have to live like us from now on?"

"No. Hosanna, you'll continue to be under investigation. The Commander will decide what to do with you afterward."

Hosanna said nothing. The conversation came to an end as he drifted back to sleep. Gayle and Doyle looked at the sleeping Hosanna with a somewhat pitiful gaze.

"Half of his face is paralyzed. He's always been extremely frail... won't he die like this?"

"There don't seem to be any injuries, so why does he look so ill?"

"He overexerted himself."

Upon hearing Kanna's response, Gayle and Doyle shivered slightly. They may not have known the details, but it was clear they thought it had something to do with Nahan.

'And they would be right.'

"Uh, by the way, would it be okay to visit Hosanna again next time?"

"You can visit during times when he's not under investigation. You'll probably have company, like today."

"Uh-huh... understood."

"I won't make any unnecessary comments."

Considering they had been in the Cavalry for a while, it was fortunate that they were picking up on social cues. Yuder gave Kanna a nod and then left the room first.

Turning

Chapter 528

Not long after leaving the room, Kanna sent Gayle and Doyle away and joined Yuder.

They strolled down the corridor, engaged in conversation.

"From what I've observed so far, Hosanna is fundamentally a quiet and quite decent person. However, he's someone who would do anything for Nahan," Kanna said.

"Just as Gayle and Doyle described him," Yuder agreed.

"Exactly."

"Why is he so devoted to Nahan?"

Pondering Yuder's question, Kanna fell deep into thought.

"Well... Hosanna is often unconscious, and even when he's awake, his mind isn't exactly clear, making it hard to read information from him. But if I had to guess, I'd say they've known each other since childhood. That seems to be the reason."

"Childhood?"

Nahan's childhood—words that could only serve to further dry out Yuder's already barren imagination.

"If I were to summarize the scant information I can read from Hosanna about Nahan, it can be expressed very simply as 'the pitiful young lord'."

Yuder's eyes turned icy.

"That's not a thought a subordinate typically harbors."

"Mm-hm. Exactly."

Kanna agreed.

"All the time he's awake, he worries about Nahan and feels guilt for his own sins. The guilt is so overwhelming that I can't even read any information about the Sage, although it doesn't seem like he's hostile toward the Sage, per se."

"It's strange that Nahan, who is known to have different intentions than the Sage, has a close comrade who isn't hostile toward the Sage."

"That's why I plan to investigate further."

Moreover, Kanna said that Hosanna harbored no resentment toward Nahan, even under these circumstances. She even speculated that he would feel the same even if he were to die here.

'Is his slow recovery despite being awake due to his lack of will to live?' Yuder thought. However, he had no intention of allowing Hosanna to die so pitifully.

"Feeling guilt means he's aware that what he's done is wrong. I have no intention of letting him die in an escapist manner. So Kanna, I'm counting on you to continue your good work in the subsequent investigations."

Though the conversation continued as if they were responding to Gayle and Doyle, in truth, everything Kanna had said was information Yuder had gleaned through her from Hosanna.

Both the news that Nahan had not yet been captured and the news about the Star of Nagran appearing in the capital would likely confuse Hosanna. As the person who knew Nahan the best, he probably wouldn't take it well.

Confusion would make it easier for Kanna to read information and cooperate in investigations. Therefore, Yuder planned to discreetly leak information to Hosanna through Kanna every time they learned something about the Sage or the Star of Nagran, observing his reactions.

Unlike simple-minded people like Gayle and Doyle, Hosanna, as one of Nahan's closest associates, was more likely to know something different from what they had gathered so far.

"Of course. If I notice anything strange, I'll call you immediately."

Having had similar experiences before, Kanna grinned, exuding confidence.

She reached up to pat Yuder's back as she usually did, but paused mid-motion, then offered an awkward smile before striding away.

"Heh heh, ahahaha. I'll go ahead. See you later."

"..."

And so, the day quickly disappeared as they dealt with various matters.

After the party, the members of the Cavalry sometimes looked at Yuder with a subtle gaze, but no one openly questioned him or changed their attitude. For this reason, Yuder continued to train and perform his duties with them as if nothing had changed. Whether he had received a noble title, or had danced with the Commander, none of these things seemed to matter in the current Cavalry, which was a relief.

The first moment he had to be by himself came after he had washed off the dust that clung to him from the training grounds and entered his own room.

Walking past vases filled with dried flowers scattered around the room, Yuder picked up a bundle of papers that sat on his bedside table. It was the translated research journal of the First Duke Tain, which he hadn't had time to properly read yet.

Earlier that day, while training, he had taken an injured member to the medical division and briefly met with Enon. While the injured member was being treated by Lusan, Enon had stealthily approached Yuder and whispered, "You should come see me soon; I've finished reading the journal."

This implied that Enon had found something of concern in the journal. So, Yuder knew he also needed to read it as soon as possible.

Bound by a string, the very first page of the paper bundle displayed handwriting that could be considered textbook perfect. At the bottom was written a date, indicating a time almost a thousand years ago. Anyone who didn't know what this was wouldn't realize that it was a research journal.

As Yuder gazed at the faint ink traces that Kishiar had transcribed, he gently ran his finger over them.

Flutter. His finger turned the page.

The progress of my ongoing research has been deemed significant, and thus I have decided to document it in greater detail.

The journal began with utter brevity. There was no grand introduction of the author or lofty exposition about his objectives. Neither were there elaborate personal anecdotes that people commonly included in diaries, nor lengthy accounts of the emotional states experienced during the research.

This must be why it was hard to immediately confirm that the First Duke Tain was the author—even if it was clear that a mage had written it.

‘He must have been incredibly practical and direct,’ Yuder thought.

The author had used the early parts of the journal to summarize his prior research. He had classified and organized 'the cursed ones'—that is, monsters—and had tried to magically determine their strengths and weaknesses.

Whenever other topics were occasionally mentioned, they were of the sort that stated how busy the author had been, delaying the progress of the research. It gave the sense of the author's deep obsession with this research.

The vitality of the cursed ones is generally far stronger than that of humans. Even without magic, they often exert a similar strength. But that doesn't mean they don't die. The source of this is still unknown...

Up until this point, the information would have been better shown to Hellem than Yuder, as it was general monster research. However, the content began to change as it moved into the middle sections.

From a certain point, the author seemed to haphazardly begin and discontinue his classifications and summaries of monsters. Kishiar had transcribed those sections as faithfully as possible, adding a note below that said, "It appears that the author frequently discontinued his writing."

Intermingled with the haphazard research notes, content resembling a true diary began to appear.

The author had frequent confrontations with someone. Although the name of this person was not mentioned, it wasn't hard to guess that the author had deeply shared and exchanged opinions about this research with that individual.

However, unlike the author who believed that a thorough understanding of monsters was essential for achieving his goals, his adversary seemed to think that research alone wouldn't suffice.

If we could discover where those cursed beings come from, time itself, unyielding in its forward march, could also be on our side. When I spoke thus, my spiritual father gave no response.

At last, Kishiar came across a passage he had read long ago in Tainu. It was the part of the journal most filled with personal reflections.

After reading, Kishiar added a quick note, followed by a few annotations at the bottom.

"The term 'cursed beings' used for monsters here is something I've seen in ancient records. It was only from the era of the Second Emperor that they began to be referred to simply as 'monsters,' or given names coined by researchers."

"The attempt to find out where monsters come from is considered unusual. Scriptures existed even back then, stating that these creatures were born from the cursed blood of the Black Moon that fell upon the world. So, it's unlikely that they would not have known this."

"Spiritual father is an old term used among mages to refer to a master or mentor. While some similarities remain today, at that time, the teachings of a master were considered absolute. A mage without a master was not considered a proper mage, and records about such individuals are scarce."

The last part was what captured Yuder's attention.

"If the author of this journal is indeed Duke Blake Van Tain, then the spiritual father he mentions would be the Archmage Luma, who was his mentor."

Kishiar had quickly discerned this through a few words, based on Yuder's own speculation.

Yuder quickly flipped through the journal. The term "spiritual father" appeared occasionally throughout. The author had multiple confrontations with his mentor, lamenting that his mentor did not seem to find value in his research.

The author thought that his mentor harbored thoughts that weren't shared with him, and he was certain he was secretly conducting other research. If his mentor was indeed Luma, then his suspicion was likely not misplaced."

Eventually, the long-standing feud between the journal's author and his spiritual father came to an end, marked by a statement that he had lost contact with his spiritual father for an extended period.

Turning

Chapter 529

'Ah... Research continued even after this point.'

Yuder quickly flipped through the pages, skimming their contents.

The author had presented his research anonymously and seemed to have attempted various magic experiments. However, the tales woven from archaic jargon and complex magical terminology didn't particularly interest Yuder. Even if something important was hidden among those lines, he believed that Enon would probably be better at discerning it than he was.

'Enon would get mad if he heard me say that, but oh well...'

Unabashedly, he continued reading until he reached the last page.

There, a few hasty sentences were scribbled.

Suffering from a terminal illness brings forth various regrets. Although my research yielded practical gains, it did not clearly provide the answers I sought. After my father's death, the only one who held the same questions was my Spiritual father. What did he gain? Where is he now after leaving Gyllandr Hill with the scripture...

I leave this here because I believe he may return someday. If it's him, he'll undoubtedly decipher everything written here.

With those telling lines, the research journal came to a close. Kishiar had also added his own notes at the end, writing, "Gyllandr seems to be a word from an ancient language, but its precise meaning is unclear. The last sentence is entirely in archaic script, and the ink is smudged; the reason for this is unknown."

"... Archmage Luma disappeared from the Empire a few years after the death of the First Emperor. Though he is said to have had little to do with temples or faith, the truth is unknown. Thus, the part about him leaving with the scriptures is somewhat enigmatic."

Could the scriptures symbolize something else? He pondered but couldn't come up with an answer. However, another phrase caught Yuder's attention more than anything else: After my father's death.

Who else could be the father of the first Duke Tain, if not the famous Founder and First Emperor of Orr?

"It's hard to imagine how the death of the First Emperor could impact both this research and Archmage Luma, but I suppose it's worth looking into."

He wondered if this was the same matter that Enon had been concerned about.

The first Duke Tain, who sought the origins of monsters. Luma, who researched time reversal. Their enigmatic confrontation, and the First Emperor of Orr. Names from a past that should have no relation to Yuder Aile, who was living a thousand years later.

Yuder stared at the last page laid out before him and finally closed the book. It was then that he noticed a very faint imprint on the blank back page.

'What's this?'

Focusing his eyes, he saw that the imprint was left by a pen tip that hadn't been inked. As he traced it with his gaze, his eyes abruptly halted.

"Yu...der."

Yuder Aile.

The moment he realized that the faint imprint spelled his name, an indescribable sensation surged through him, making his blood rush and his heart pound furiously.

The markings were in Kishiar's handwriting, albeit in a different language. Yuder gently touched the spot where his own name was written with the tip of a dried ink pen. He imagined the man who had written his name one character at a time after completing the translation.

A neat repetition, but a scribble that would be invisible unless one paid close attention.

As he felt the texture through his fingertips, he was reminded of Kishiar's voice calling out to him. At the same time, it was as if a small current sparked through him.

"..."

Yuder briefly lifted his finger, then furrowed his brow and lowered his head.

Kishiar had written this translation while Yuder had left for a few hours under the pretext of meeting Enon. Imagining him writing it down as he waited for Yuder's return, and even inscribing Yuder's name in an unnoticeable spot with any time he had left, made it impossible for Yuder to repress his sentimental feelings without biting his lip.

Especially when he considered that in some way, the waiting continued even now.

Yuder thought of Kishiar's red eyes, which prioritized Yuder over any other questions or waiting. He then took a deep breath and made up his mind.

'Enon told me to come soon... It wouldn't matter if that meant today, would it?'

"You looked busy; I thought you'd come a few days later. What brings you so quickly?"

"I just finished reading the translation the Commander gave me, so I was curious."

"Hmm. Alright. Come in."

Enon's room in the Cavalry was located right next to the medical division. It was an optimal location to both take care of severely injured patients and sense the presence of unexpected visitors at any time.

As Yuder entered the room, which smelled strongly of dried herbs, he got straight to the point.

"Did you find anything about the journal?"

"If you've read it all, you'd know. It's because of what's written at the very end."

Enon fetched the original journal and opened it. He pointed to the last page.

"First, this. Gyllandr Hill. I know where it is."

"What?"

"It's the name of the house where Luma stayed while conducting his research. To be precise, it was until I woke up."

Enon nonchalantly revealed the identity of Gyllandr Hill, ignoring Yuder's rarely altered expression as he continued speaking.

"I was planning to go there soon anyway. Thought there might be something useful."

"Can you go?"

"I can. Don't ask for details. Next, look at this."

"Why this section?"

This time, Enon pointed to the sentence, "If it's him, he would naturally understand what's written here."

"This part is written in enchanted ink. It's obscured by multiple layers of illusions, Luma-style. Unless you know Luma's magic well, like me, you won't be able to understand it."

"Ah..."

It then occurred to Yuder that Kishiar had noted that he could not figure out why that particular sentence was written in a hazy and complex manner.

"The Commander had also marked that sentence as strange."

"Really? He's not deeply schooled in magic, yet he noticed that?"

Enon's expression changed very oddly before he scowled.

"Ah, whatever. Anyway, when you break it down, it reveals this."

As Enon brushed the sentence in a peculiar way, claiming that even though he couldn't perform magic, he could decode this, new text appeared on the previously blank page beside it. At a glance, it seemed to be quite a significant amount, covering multiple pages.

The journal appeared to be left unfinished, as if its author had died before using up all the paper. As it turned out, however, there was more—hidden in the empty pages.

"After a certain amount of time, it will disappear, so it won't last much longer. The guy who wrote this journal left his thoughts freely penned before he died. From my perspective, this is what really matters to you."

The tension sharply escalated upon hearing these words.

"What does it say?"

"You may recall I once mentioned that maybe Luma began his research after encountering someone like you—a person who could travel back in time. Do you remember?"

"I remember."

"If we assume that everything written here is based on facts, then that person might have been the First Emperor of this land."

It was a shocking statement. Yuder recalled the writings of the first Duke Tain, who wrote that after his father's death, he and his spiritual father, his mentor, had been wondering the same thing. Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

"You're saying the First Emperor might have been like me? How? Are you sure?"

"I can't guarantee its accuracy. What's important is that it seems both the author of this journal and Luma believed so."

The revelation felt so unrealistic, so absurd, as it was utterly unexpected.

'I almost want to ask if I've read something wrong.'

However, Yuder calmed himself, realizing that his own experiences would sound no less implausible to others.

Check out the new project:

Surviving as a Mage in a Magic Academy

Graduate student Yi-han finds himself reborn in another world as the youngest child of a mage family.

– I'm never attending school, ever again!

'What do you wish to achieve in life?'

'I wish to play around and live comforta-'

'You must be aware of your talent. Now go attend Einroguard!'

'Patriarch!'

My future would be guaranteed once I graduate. For my future!

Turning

Chapter 530

In the past, Yuder had heard that the power to manipulate time simply did not exist in this world. However, the living proof that such a thing might be possible was Yuder Aile himself. As incredible as it seemed, he had no choice but to acknowledge its potential.

'I would have to see the original text with my own eyes to be certain... but according to Enon, Luma must have had a reason to start this kind of research.'

One thing was certain at the moment. Even if the First Duke Tain believed in it and carried out the research, he ultimately failed to obtain the answer he sought.

"The information is a bit scattered, but some parts do feel similar to what I remember Luma saying."

"I'd like to see and read it for myself as well."

For a matter of such gravity, hearing about it was not enough. Sensing a question in Yuder's eyes, Enon frowned deeply and crossed his arms.

"I didn't expect you to come this quickly, so I haven't written the translation yet. I'll send it along with this journal once it's done. And it'd be great if you could return it for me as well."

"Alright."

Enon made a stern hand gesture, his face full of reluctance to go through the trouble of returning the experimental journal to Kishiar himself.

"Ah. There's one more thing to discuss."

"What is it?"

"Remember the magic energy that was concentrated in the Great Sarain Forest... Where they discovered a magic ore vein there."

Enon's expression darkened as he mentioned the place that the mages of the Western Mage Union had once referred to as a "magic spring."

"In this journal, there's something that could reveal why the magic energy was concentrated there in the first place."

"The cause?"

Magic energy, which naturally flowed like water, wasn't supposed to accumulate in one place for an extended period. However, in the Great Sarain Forest, an inexplicable, ancient magic was obstructing its natural flow. For nearly a millennium, the accumulated magic energy had unnaturally accelerated the growth of the forest, making it one of the most monster-infested lands on the continent.

The forest, which had been a nuisance as it devoured the borders of various nations and was filled with gigantic trees too difficult for ordinary people to even scratch, had suddenly calmed down when the accumulated magic energy was released and the ore vein was discovered.

Enon had previously speculated that someone might have arranged the place to act as a "magic spring."

But now Enon's words suggested... Could the culprit behind the concentration of the magic energy be the First Duke Tain?

Noticing Yuder's questioning gaze, Enon offered an explanation.

"The author of the journal, during his research on monsters, realized that areas with frequent monster appearances have distorted magic energy flows. He speculated that deliberately distorting the magic energy flow in a specific area might produce specific results... It's a similar line of thinking."

Considering that the Great Sarain Forest had been formed by slowly accumulating magic energy in a specific area, Enon's words were indeed plausible.

"There's no record in the journal that such an experiment was actually conducted. But it's hard to say that there's no correlation, in my opinion."

"So you're saying, either the one who wrote the journal or someone else who knew of this concept could have done it."

"Exactly."

Yuder found Enon's words to be both logical and plausible.

Creating such a space would not have been ordinarily difficult, but if there was a goal that required gathering magic energy in that manner... Perhaps one of the astonishingly talented mages from long ago might have considered it worthwhile.

"That's all I want to say. This might not be of interest to you, but I wanted to mention it anyway."

"It seems like something the Commander would like to hear."

Yuder was genuinely grateful to Enon. There was nothing more reassuring than his presence, given his extensive knowledge of long-forgotten magical lore and the Archmage Luma, which others were unaware of.

However, Enon's expression changed abruptly to one of distaste upon hearing the words of gratitude.

"Forget it. I don't want to imagine what he'd like, so just don't say anything."

"But—"

"No! I said I don't want to know! It's not like I looked this up for him! If you feel even a bit sorry for me having to monitor the Awakeners without any days off because of you, then just say thank you!"

In the end, Yuder could only respond quietly with, "Thank you," bowing under the weight of Enon's fierce anger.

"Is that all you're really going to say?"

"Thank you, brother."

Yuder added another word, and only then did Enon's rage subside.

...

"I received a message from Dawn Palace earlier. It seems we've been granted permission to check on His Majesty's condition. We will likely enter the palace this evening, and depending on the circumstances, we may even spend the night there."

"...Really?"

Yuder lifted his head abruptly at the unexpected news that struck his ears. It was unexpected but truly welcome news. The Empress had kept her promise astonishingly quickly.

Kishiar, who sat in the Commander's seat, narrowed his eyes slightly and smiled.

"Yes, it's sudden, but are you alright with that?"

"Yes, of course."

"And what have you been thinking about?"

Having just finished reviewing and categorizing the correspondence that had come to the Cavalry, and pondering the hidden contents of the journal of experiment he had discussed with Enon, Yuder closed his mouth as if his thoughts had been discovered. Enon had not yet sent his translation of the hidden parts of the journal, and as it concerned the First Emperor, an extraordinary subject, Yuder wasn't sure what to say to Kishiar.

Kishiar probably didn't know that Yuder had come across such strange information, but even the thought of the First Emperor was enough to make him feel weird.

If someone else, whether it be the First Emperor or anyone else, had also experienced time traveling back into their past like Yuder, what reason would they have for doing so?

Would that person have also tried to change something? And if so, what did they change? Was the world as it is now a result of those changes? Or perhaps...

"...I was thinking about the translated journal of experiment you gave me. I finished reading it yesterday and met with Enon to discuss it," Yuder finally said, as if shaking off his tangled thoughts.

"Ah, I see. Was my translation helpful?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"I'm glad then. It was worth the effort."

Despite the season being winter, the smile on his face was as refreshing as spring. What expression had he worn when he softly wrote Yuder's name on the back of the paper with a dry pen tip?

As Yuder tried to discover the unknown face within the familiar one, he realized how foolish he was being and stopped thinking about it.

"Although there's something difficult to discuss right now regarding that matter... I'd like to inform you when it's confirmed."

"Hmm. Seems like there was something interesting, then? Looking forward to it. If there's anything I can assist with, feel free to say."

The hidden truth within the journal didn't seem all that exciting. On the contrary, it was more headache-inducing. But when Kishiar said it that way, it somehow felt plausible.

The sensation was reminiscent of the warmth he had felt in Kishiar's arms on the day he had returned from meeting the Empress. An irresistible urge toward what the other was offering, after losing a sense of familiarity he had once had alone. Hunger and fear arrived the moment he realized what he wanted.

All those indescribable emotions were now more intense than ever.

"..."

At that point in his reflections, Kishiar's pen, which had been steadily scratching away, abruptly stopped.

"This is the first time I've sensed such a strong fragrance here since the vacation."

Only then did Yuder realize that he had been emitting a scent toward him. The fact that he hadn't known until the other pointed it out was profoundly embarrassing.

"I apologize. It wasn't intentional."

"Is that so? It's a bit disappointing if it came out unintentionally."

The man deeply inhaled before finishing his last signature and putting down his pen.

"It's good to know I wasn't the only one who was struggling to hold back. It's somewhat comforting."