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"Gakane, are you worried about what Yuder might be doing inside?"

Hidden under a veil of darkness conjured by his shadow clone, Gakane abruptly turned his head at the sound of Kanna's unexpected words.

"Huh? What?"

"You've been staring at the path leading inward, looking lost in thought. Even without asking, it's obvious you're concerned."

There was no hint of scolding in Kanna's softly whispered words, as she gazed at her comrade. Exhaling a sigh, Gakane cracked a smile.

"Yes... You're right. Whatever he's up to, if he's come this far, it must be a highly important task. I can't help but be a little worried."

"It's only natural. No one knows better than we do how careless Yuder can be with himself. I'm also really worried."

Their mission was to protect the Sun Palace. They knew very well they shouldn't divert their focus to other matters, yet it was impossible to completely erase concern for their comrade. Gakane felt a mix of shame that his weakness had been so easily spotted and relief that his companion was the considerate and tight-lipped Kanna.

"But it'll be fine. It's Yuder, after all."

"Yes... you're right."

Both of them found themselves visualizing Yuder's face. In their Cavalry, his name had become a symbol of absolute trust. Everyone believed that if Yuder took the lead on something, failure was not an option.

And they also felt a sense of pride that Yuder had sought their help in such a situation.

"So, let's focus on what we're here to do. It won't do to get distracted and overlook something important."

"Haha... True. Speaking of which, I should detach a portion of my shadow clone to scout the surrounding area."

Gakane awkwardly maneuvered his hand, causing a part of the shadow covering the floor of the dimly lit corridor to shake and detach, standing before them. Kanna exclaimed in awe.

"Wow, so you can do something like this now? That's amazing."

"No, it's not that impressive. Not when you consider how much you and the others have progressed."

Scratching his head, Gakane suddenly paused and turned. An inexplicable sense of unease emanated from the silent darkness beyond.

"Gakane? What's wrong?"

"I thought I heard something. Didn't you?"

"What sound? I didn't hear anything."

"It's a strange feeling... Can you use your ability to check what's happening outside, Kanna?"

"I'll try through the wall."

Kanna touched the wall beside her. But just as she closed her eyes to activate her ability, hurried footsteps echoed from the far end of the corridor.

Instantly, Gakane sent Kanna behind him and stepped forward, expanding the size of the shadow clone that enveloped them. Almost simultaneously, the owner of the footsteps came into view. A bloodied young servant stumbled forward, shouting.

"Emergency! Emergency! Intruders are outside! The knights have been attacked! Take me to the chief attendant at once!"

"What?"

Both Gakane and Kanna widened their eyes in disbelief. Gakane quickly retracted his shadow clone and approached the man.

"What happened?"

"I don't know... Intruders... The knights have been attacked..."

The man continued to shake, his eyes vacant and unfocused. To reassure him, Gakane moved a bit closer.

"We're just temporary guards. But intruders? Where did they appear from?"

"I don't know. Let me see the chief attendant!"

At that moment, Gakane's fingers, which were about to move reflexively, flinched. Alongside, Kanna firmly grabbed the hem of his garment. Her other hand was leaning on the wall.

"Kanna?"

"That person is strange."

"What?"

"I just read information through the wall. There are many knights hiding here besides us. But now... I can't read any information from them. And I can't sense anything from that person either."

"Ah... really?"

"Huh?"

This time, it was Kanna who looked surprised.

"The chief attendant explicitly said not to let anyone pass this point. If that man works under such a figure, he would have received emergency instructions to report through another means, just like us. Yet, he insists on seeing the chief attendant..."

Gakane furrowed his brows and scanned the man up and down.

"...Don't you find it odd that he keeps repeating the same thing?"

"Indeed."

As their eyes met and they concurred about the eerie peculiarity of the situation, the bloodied attendant suddenly shouted, "Let me see the chief attendant!"

"Sorry, but that's not possible. Stand back, Kanna. I'll restrain him."

"Okay."

As Kanna drew her dagger and took a few steps back, a shadow clone burst forth from Gakane. With a formidable punch, it sent the bloodied attendant flying down the corridor.

"Argh!"

The flying attendant writhed on the ground but couldn't get up. Yet, moments later, a red blob suddenly shot out of his gaping mouth, flying toward Gakane like light.

"...What is that?"

Gakane instinctively expanded his shadow to block it. His body moved ahead of his thoughts, thanks to his rigorous training.

A loud noise reverberated as if something had collided and exploded against the shadow clone. The ensuing shockwave shook the entire floor. Gakane rolled back a few times, barely regaining his posture with a cough.

"Gakane!"

"I'm fine. Are you?"

"I'm okay too! But what was that just now?"

"I have no idea. He spat it out when I knocked him down... Did he lose his mind?"

"Seems so. I'll read him again."

Gakane used his shadow clone to restrain the man and dragged him closer. Kanna touched the man's blood-stained clothes and activated her ability.

"Are you getting any readings now?"

"Yes, now I can read... Wait a minute..."

Kanna's eyelids trembled. A moment later, a gasp of shock escaped her lips.

"This man is a genuine attendant!"

"What?"

"He had run out to investigate the intruders we were warned about earlier. But then someone he was helping spat out a red blob just like the one we saw..."

Before Kanna could finish, she suddenly lifted her head. More footsteps were approaching from the direction she had turned to look.

"Intruder..."

"An intruder!"

"We must see the chief attendant..."

Over ten individuals appeared, dragging their feet. Like the attendant they had knocked out, they were all muttering similar phrases. Their eyes were vacant, unfocused. Moreover...

"It seems we have actual knights among them this time," Kanna murmured, her face pale but composed. Among the staggering figures approaching them, several were clad in armor, and others wielded swords.

"Kanna, do you think these people are being controlled by someone?"

"It's likely. Remember that thing we saw earlier? It probably does this to them."

"It's odd that we can't hear anything from outside in a situation like this. And while there should be other knights besides us, none have shown up... Magic can't be the cause."

"It's the work of Awakeners. There's no doubt about it."

Both were certain that more than one individual was involved. A glance between them was enough to confirm their shared conviction.

"We may not know who they are, but one thing is certain: they aren't infiltrating the imperial palace with good intentions. Let's stop them all and find out who's behind this. They can't be far."

"I'll read the information, locate the Awakeners, and send a signal to Yuder's side. I'm not sure if it will reach him under these circumstances, but..."

"Understood."

"Be careful, Gakane! Those people are real servants and knights."

"Don't worry."

Relying solely on swordsmanship would make it difficult to counter the multiple palace knights with years of experience. But Gakane had always had a shadow to steadfastly protect him.

'Incapacitating them without killing will be difficult. However... it oddly doesn't seem impossible.'

Gakane briefly glanced at Kanna, who was leaning against a wall with her eyes closed, before drawing his sword. Simultaneously, shadow clones arose around him. It was at this moment, as he was sizing up his staggering foes and tensing every muscle in his body, that—

"...So, you're here."

A familiar voice unexpectedly echoed from the adjacent corridor. Startled, both quickly turned their heads to see a new face and simultaneously exclaimed, "Sir Zuckerman?"

"When did you get here...?"

"I assure you, it's really me. You don't have to be so wary. I was here ahead of you to escort the Duke."

Nathan Zuckerman casually flicked the blood off his sword. Both Kanna and Gakane watched the droplets fall, rendered speechless.

"I heard you two would be holding down the fort, which had me worried. But it appears there was no need for concern after all."

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"I heard you two would be holding down the fort, which had me worried. But it appears there was no need for concern after all."

With a single sweep of his gaze, Nathan Zuckerman seemed to have assessed the entire situation. Gakane and Kanna finally calmed their anxious hearts and shared the information they had gathered with the southern knight.

Upon hearing that the current events appeared to be instigated by unknown Awakeners, Nathan Zuckerman seemed unsurprised.

"I expected as much. Other knights who were with me have fallen to the same tactics."

"Really?"

"Not all of them, but we're short on time. Let's discuss the details after we've sorted things out."

Nathan Zuckerman stepped forward, lifting his sword. As he prepared to face multiple enemies, his expression remained utterly composed, betraying neither excitement nor tension. Gakane quickly followed him, shouting a warning.

"Sir Zuckerman, are you aware of the red blobs that burst out of these people once they're subdued? You must avoid them. Be careful!"

"Yes, I know."

As Nathan Zuckerman calmly responded, the figures who had lost their focus surged toward him all at once. While the low-level minions were easily subdued by mere shadow clones, those wielding swords proved more challenging.

Gakane dispatched some of his shadows to protect Kanna, who was still reading information in the background. He wore multiple streams of shadows around his body like armor while brandishing his sword.

The shadow clones entwined around him would extend and twist freely, attacking enemies from all directions. At times, they spread out like a wall to protect him. Gakane maneuvered effortlessly through the incoming attacks, changing the tide of battle and launching relentless offensives. Although the explosions caused by the red blobs bursting from the fallen enemies made it difficult to maintain his stance, he managed to avoid any notable injuries.

Watching knights fall under the coordinated attack of his shadow clones and sword, Gakane felt a different kind of thrill than when he had hunted monsters in the West.

'I have entered the imperial palace and I'm fighting and gaining the upper hand against the famed imperial knights...'

When he had first created his shadow clones, they could only mimic his movements. But after extensive training and improvements, they now moved freely, without needing to maintain a human-like shape.

He even had the leisure to entertain stray thoughts during the battle, amazed at how strong he had become. Gakane simultaneously directed his shadow clones and sword toward the third charging knight.

The moment the two blades clashed, his shadow clones elongated beneath him, rising from behind the opponent to strike down upon the knight's head. Accompanied by a cracking sound, the knight wavered for a moment before dropping his sword and collapsing onto the ground.

'Ah... did I hit him too hard?'

Gakane suppressed his regret for the fallen knight and used his shadows to contain the erupting red blob.

-Boom...!

Another crashing noise reverberated, followed by a brief silence.

'What's next...'

Wiping away his sweat and turning around, Gakane halted his steps. Contrary to his expectations, he found that no one else remained in the area.

Having subdued more than a dozen opponents, Nathan Zuckerman slowly sheathed his sword. Unlike Gakane, who was panting heavily and visibly soiled from a hard-fought battle, Nathan remained as composed as ever.

"When did he...?"

Gakane's eyes trembled slightly. He had no precise measure of Nathan's true capabilities. This was the first time he had ever seen the man in direct combat. However, thanks to his own past efforts to become a knight, he knew Nathan's skill was anything but ordinary.

'He's moved faster than me, faced more enemies, and yet he hasn't even broken a sweat. There's not even a hint of Aura's fragment... Just how strong is he? And to think, a knight of his skill has been living unnoticed, as though a mere adjutant under our Commander?'

Interrupting Gakane's train of thought, Nathan finally spoke. "You don't seem to be injured."

"Ah, yes."

"Let's separate the weapons and tie up the unconscious. Can't be too careful."

"Ah, yes, understood!"

Briefly glancing aside, Gakane noticed that Kanna was still sweating profusely with her eyes closed, seemingly struggling to read something unknown. He left one of his shadow clones to protect her as he started to help Nathan tie up the fallen. Soon, he realized something new about the Southern knight: Nathan was astoundingly quick and precise, even in the mundane task of tying people up.

'Why is he so good at this? How often does a knight have to tie people up? The more I know, the more nervous I get.'

"Where I come from, battles often erupt for the same reason as now, with bloodied people begging for help," Nathan said, dispassionately conversing while skillfully binding the hands and feet of an unconscious foe. "Even if we subdue the person being manipulated, if we fail to block the ejected red blobs they've swallowed, we instantly become new victims."

Gakane snapped back to attention and nodded. "Ah, yes, that's true."

According to Nathan, even skilled knights found it difficult to act properly when faced with bizarre powers and when trusted allies suddenly turned against them. Internal confusion was substantial, especially since knights in leadership positions were also affected. However, Nathan had suspected the work of an Awakener and stepped forward, suppressing those being manipulated before locking them in an empty room.

He then gathered the remaining people to completely seal off the second palace where they now stood. Gakane couldn't help but express his admiration.

"You're incredible."

"Both the Duke and His Majesty had predicted that something like this might happen," Nathan said. "The real issue is the temporary loss of manpower. However, I don't see that as particularly advantageous for the enemy."

"Ah, right. Since there are no more people left to control, the enemy is also at a disadvantage."

If only those who swallowed the red blob could be manipulated, then the enemy would also find it difficult to move freely in a situation where no such vulnerable individuals remained.

'They probably started by controlling the weaker attendants to infiltrate us, planning to use them to exploit the knights' vulnerabilities and penetrate deeper into the palace,' Gakane thought to himself.

The audacity of the plan was staggering, and it sent shivers down Gakane's spine to think how tremendously effective it had been. For the first time, Gakane fully grasped how vulnerable those who had never truly encountered an Awakener's abilities were, despite being an Awakener himself.

"The enemy appears to consist of at least two individuals. One with the ability to manipulate people, like we've just witnessed, and another who somehow manages to obstruct our senses, muffling noises and sensations from outside and within."

"Yes, Kanna and I had a similar theory. We are Awakeners, we should have been more vigilant in preparing ourselves. I apologize."

"It's alright. Even among Awakeners, it's not as though you can instantly discern each other's abilities. We have secured the area as instructed, so that's enough."

"Even if they can use their abilities from a distance, they can't be too far away. We need to catch them before they realize what's happening and flee."

"In that case, the two of you stay here. I will conduct the search myself."

Responding impassively, Nathan Zuckerman began to tie up the arms and legs of the remaining individual.

"Going alone is risky. At least wait until Kanna gathers some more information before moving—"

"We already know who likely committed this act. Wasting time is not in our favor. It's crucial to secure at least some evidence."

Just as Nathan Zuckerman finished tying up the last person, Kanna's eyes flew open, and she shouted, "This isn't all! Outside! No, upward!"

"Kanna?"

Breaking out of the shadows, a sweating Kanna clenched her teeth as she ran out.

"I read the movements of all those who were controlled! The perpetrators are no longer here. The initial control started not with humans but with an animal—a bird!"

"A bird, you say?"

"Yes. So, this chaos is not their ultimate goal. They used this as an opportunity to determine the Emperor's location and to figure out what's happening inside—"

At that moment, Nathan Zuckerman drew his sword again.

"We need to go up. Follow me."

"What was that noise just now?"

"I suspect a rather noisy cat has entered."

Kishiar responded to the Emperor's weary query with a flick of his hand. Yuder, locking eyes with his piercing red gaze, was certain that Kishiar was thinking the same thing as himself at that moment.

'Intruders.'

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"Intruders."

Ever since they had increased the guards at the Sun Palace due to suspicions that information about their internal affairs might be leaking, they had anticipated something like this might happen. But there was a significant difference between mere anticipation and the tactile sensation of the event unfolding.

"It's clear who's behind the intrusion, but the real issue is figuring out who they sent... The loud noises and tremors indicate it's not a simple assassin."

Before coming here, the last faces Yuder had seen were those of Gakane and Kanna. Though he knew they weren't ones to be trifled with, the large tremors he had just heard couldn't help but make him nervous.

It seemed Emperor Keilusa felt the same. Until just a moment ago, the internal situation had been relatively smooth, but now, it began to waver slightly.

"Your Majesty, I told you there would be a time when you must focus on only one thing. That time is now," said Kishiar.

With Kishiar's words, the internal flow within the Emperor regained its original steadiness. However, a moment later, the small sounds and tremors emanating irregularly from outside began to unsettle the atmosphere again.

Boom, bang. Each time a thunderous noise reverberated, followed by a tremor, the walls and bed shook, and the internal stability of the Emperor continued to waver.

'What on earth is happening?' Yuder furrowed his brow. He focused harder than ever, but the internal chaos within the Emperor made him miss the mark several times.

And then, at the peak of this chaos, the Empress stumbled and clung to her chair as an even louder noise and tremor spread.

"Ah..."

"Empress!"

Lying down, the Emperor tried to move to call out to her in a strained voice, but his internal equilibrium went haywire. Yuder's force started to be pushed back.

"Your Majesty!"

The chief attendant held down the Emperor, shouting.

The lustrous red energy that had been following the pure Red Stone's power was swept away in a blink, and the energy that Kishiar had been painfully gathering also seemed ready to disperse. Yuder felt familiar pains in his eyes and somewhere within his body, as though his entire being was in flux.

Across from him, Kishiar had also paled dramatically. Drops of sweat trickled down his temple and nose, dropping below his chin like drops of blood. Seeing this, Yuder felt a spark in front of his eyes.

The threads connecting the two wavered; their link screamed.

"No."

Yuder drew even more energy from himself to keep from losing his way, but the elusive red hues did not return. Unknowingly, his pupils had turned a fearsome golden color as he drew a deep breath.

"Get a hold of yourself, Your Majesty!"

This couldn't be where it all collapsed, but the Emperor showed no signs of regaining stability.

"Ugh... ah..."

Unable to overcome the pain, the Emperor clawed at the sheet. Blood oozed from between his broken nails, staining the fabric a dark red.

"Your Majesty!"

The Emperor's glasses slipped off his sweat-soaked face. Yuder clenched his teeth as he saw the Emperor's deep red eyes staring into some indeterminate void.

"At this rate..."

He was not only unable to move on to the next phase but also on the verge of losing all the energy he had gathered so far.

What should he do?

Just then, while running through countless scenarios in his mind, Yuder suddenly felt a strong grip seize his hand.

“ ... ”

Kishiar was watching him.

The moment Yuder met those unwavering eyes, seemingly untroubled despite being glazed over in a ghastly white, the rage that had been surging within him began to subside. The pain that felt as if it would burst through his eyes also started to ebb away.

It was only then that Yuder realized his own eyes had turned gold and were dripping blood. The blood that stained the sheet was not just that of Emperor Keilusa.

"It's okay," Kishiar whispered, his lips barely moving.

"Haven't we been preparing for this moment?"

So, it's okay to close your eyes for a moment.

With an irresistible command, the scent that enveloped Yuder shifted.

Without realizing it, Yuder's eyes gently closed. At the same time, something hot once again trickled down from one eye.

"Your Highness, Empress!"

Beyond the darkened vision that forcefully shut off the power of his perception, a low, soft voice struck his ears more clearly than before.

"Come here, please hold His Majesty's hand. Hurry."

The Empress rushed over, panting, and tried to sit beside the Emperor to take his hand. However, the Emperor didn't hold her hand. With fingertips stained in blood, he barely managed to brush the Empress's hand aside. A murmuring slipped through Emperor Keilusa's lips.

"Lea...ve. Dan...gerous. Go...away."

"Your Majesty..."

He muttered, imploring her to leave and abandon him.

This was the earnestness of a man who hadn't forgotten for a single moment that his proximity could be dangerous to those around him, ever since the problem with the vessel arose.

"Kishiar, no. I must... take the Empress and..."

"Your Majesty!"

Tears filled the Empress's eyes. Her face contorted as though the world was falling apart, a suppressed sob shaking her throat. Yet she bit her lip and managed not to cry out loud.

Instead, her gaze turned to Kishiar, who was watching her.

Kishiar met her eyes with an unwavering stare, as if he knew she would look his way. He slowly parted his lips to whisper something to the Empress. His words didn't register in her mind until moments later.

"Say whatever you wish. Tell me things that only you, as the Empress, can say. It's okay to be angry, to resent."

Leave the rest to me.

The Empress hesitated, uncertainty and wavering flickering through her eyes.

However, a moment later, she once again reached out to firmly grasp the Emperor's hand. Desperately, earnestly. The hands she held were much more emaciated and withered than she remembered.

Composing her faltering expression, she finally spoke.

"Where do you expect me to go?"

From the lips of the Empress, pressed against the icy cold hands, came a soft voice.

"I'm not leaving. I will stay right here."

"..."

"I won't abandon you and flee like last time."

"..."

"Didn't you promise? That we'll never face the dawn alone again. That we will lie side by side, holding hands, watching countless days break together. That it will be the family we create."

Do you remember? The Empress murmured, her tear-soaked eyes and cheeks contrasting sharply against the Emperor's fingertips holding her face. Slowly, she leaned in and pressed her trembling lips to his fingers, as if swallowing her sobs. At that moment, the Emperor's fingertips trembled as if struck by lightning.

...

Gakane and Kanna sprinted after Nathan Zuckerman. As they climbed the stairs and passed through the corridor, an inexplicable mix of emotions and heat pounded in his head.

'The intruders can control more than just humans...'

It was a fortunate thing that they had focused their attention outside in search of the puppeteer. If not for Kanna, who had forcefully extracted a wealth of information, they would have been caught off guard. Although Kanna was currently nosebleeding from the overload of information, her expression was intense and focused.

'My head hurts, but it's fine. I've deciphered it.'

At first, Kanna had been taken aback that she couldn't read the information from the one being controlled. However, in a state of urgent crisis, her abilities had surged to new heights. She had enveloped the entire palace, sucking in an overwhelming amount of data.

To be honest, she thought her head was going to explode for a moment. But the rigorous training she had recently undergone in blocking and sorting information came in handy. That time spent obsessing over her training had not been wasted.

Throughout their run, Kanna was simultaneously exerting her abilities and endlessly filtering and categorizing information. The walls she touched, the windows she passed, and even the air—it all became a source of information, endlessly spewed forth by her abilities.

People who had passed through this place, their movements, words, and resulting thought patterns. Every single action of the people stationed in the palace was being mixed, sorted, and combined in her subconscious, delivering the 'correct answer' to her in a time frame beyond human comprehension.

"Gakane, Zuckerman. Find an animal, a bird, or perhaps a rat—small creatures that could slip through windows amidst the chaos. They must be here, somewhere close by."

"Understood."

"I got it."

She had no intention of failing the mission entrusted to her.

'Whoever it is, they won't get past me. I'll make sure of that.'

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She had no intention of failing the mission entrusted to her.

"No one's getting past this point, no matter who they are. I'll make sure of it."

The lack of clear information on the awakened intruders was because they had meticulously hidden their true forms and infiltrated indirectly through manipulation.

At first, they had used small animals that anyone would let their guard down around. They successfully controlled a person through these animals, causing a domino effect—like a contagious disease—that sowed chaos among those guarding the Sun Palace, allowing them to easily achieve their goal.

They probably wouldn't have chosen this method had they known about Kanna, but it was clear that Kanna needed to employ a completely different method of reading to discover more about them.

She couldn't bear it—not being of any help, especially when it was something well within her abilities, not something that pushed her physical limits.

'I've really become a full-fledged member of the Cavalry, haven't I?'

But what was so odd about wanting to accomplish a task entrusted to her because she alone was deemed capable of doing it?

Kanna thought of the insignia of the Deputy Commander of the Cavalry that she treasured and kept close to her heart. Being true to the Cavalry was nothing strange. It was, rather, something to be proud of.

Her formidable will surged within her, spreading even more widely in accordance with its master's will.

She needed to read further. Faster, more precisely, and gather more useful information. About the past, the present, and even what would happen in the future through all of it!

"Over there! Below that wall...!"

As Kanna sprinted and pointed to one side, Nathan Zuckerman immediately leaped forward, sword in hand, with an entirely different level of energy. He moved as if weightless, precisely skewering a small something that had tried to hide in the intricate walls and dark floor.

What was revealed beneath the blade was a single rat.

"Over there too!"

"Be careful, Adjutant Zuckerman!"

Following Kanna's direction, Gakane immediately dispatched a shadow to locate and kill another rat in the vicinity. Both rats expelled a red mist from their mouths just before dying, but no one present was fazed by it.

"Two rats. This can't be all of them."

"The rats are numerous and small, making them ideal for scouting. They probably haven't found the Emperor yet."

"Can you read the locations of all the scattered rats?"

"Questioning whether I can do it or not is meaningless at this point. Of course, I will."

Even as she panted for breath, not a single crack appeared in the resolve present in Kanna's voice. Nathan Zuckerman looked at the two Cavalry members, who had once anxiously followed him around like children, with newfound awe.

"Very well, proceed then. If you can pinpoint their locations, it's better for us to gather and eliminate them quickly rather than disperse."

"Yes. Now that we have a lead, I'll continue reading."

"Kanna! Before we go again, you're sweating a lot. Take this."

Gakane took advantage of a brief moment to hand Kanna a handkerchief, then surveyed their surroundings.

"Even if you locate the direction of the invading rats, they are too small and fast to chase down. From now on, instead of killing them, I'll focus on spreading my shadows widely to act like a net, blocking any escape routes."

"Killing and protecting you two will be my responsibility."

Roles were quickly and efficiently divided. Kanna rejected Gakane's offer to carry her if she got tired, stuffing a handkerchief into her nose as she yelled in a nasal voice, "Follow me!"

...

Meanwhile, the trio was chasing hidden intruders within the palace.

Several 'healers' had gathered in a guest room located in the most remote corner of Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resided. They were staying overnight under the pretext that the Crown Prince's treatment was taking longer than expected, but this, of course, was an excuse.

Although they had entered the palace as healers, they were actually Awakeners. And tonight, they were obliged to do something different, acting upon a request from a high-ranking noble who had summoned them here.

The Awakeners sat in a circle, holding hands, their eyes closed as they twitched and occasionally moved their bodies significantly while continuing to use their abilities. Among them, one Awakener opened his eyes with a start, panting and frowning.

"Damn it. Can't get a proper read on it. At first, it spread faster than I thought, but now it's almost entirely vanished... I can't really tell, but the ones we're dealing with seem like they might be from the Cavalry."

"How many are left?"

"Still over ten."

"Isn't that good enough? The important work is supposed to be done by Diemon, anyway. You just need to shake them up a bit and find the location."

"Damn, but they're too fast... Ah, we lost another one!"

One of the Awakeners complained with a scowling face and a cough.

Diemon, who had been sitting quietly with a timid face, turned his head as his name was mentioned. He wanted to join the conversation, but no one made eye contact with him. While he hesitated, the Awakeners had moved on to another topic.

"Juve. Is the barrier you planted still intact? How is it?"

"It's fine as long as the object I infused my power into isn't broken."

"How are they finding us so well? Is it really the Cavalry?"

"No way. There's no chance they knew we'd be involved. How could they?"

Uneasiness flickered among the Awakeners. As worry began to spread subtly, another Awakener raised his voice to shift the atmosphere.

"Look, we're just doing what we were asked to do. No one knows we're here. The Sage said this was necessary for all of us, so why wouldn't we do it?"

"Well, that's not... that's not the point."

"We could end up failing our mission, and everyone we've sent out could die."

"The Sage must've thought of that, too. Just do as you're told. Do you think opportunities like this come easily?"

"It's easy for you to say when you're not doing much..."

One of the grumbling Awakeners glanced towards the closed door.

"When exactly is the Sage returning? It seems like the conversation with the Crown Prince is taking too long."

"The Sage was extremely pleased to be staying with the Crown Prince. It's natural for their conversation to be lengthy."

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and the person they had been waiting for finally appeared.

"I apologize for the delay."

"Sage!"

"No need to apologize, Sage!"

As the Sage returned, the Awakeners regained their composure. With bright smiles, they collectively welcomed the Sage's return.

The sage listened to the voices of those eagerly reporting the progress of their tasks and encouraged them with a warm tone.

"It's alright. There is nothing wrong with the work you are doing. Even if you fail, it's not your fault. As you have always done, I'm certain that you'll achieve what you aim for this time as well. Trust in each other, and trust in yourselves."

Hearing this voice that seemed to be a blend of all the warmth and trust in the world, the eyes of the Awakeners immediately softened. For a moment, they all forgot why they had been anxious just a minute ago.

The atmosphere among the Awakeners, now refocused on their tasks, had completely shifted.

"One of the objects containing sealing power has shattered. But there are still others remaining, so we should be fine."

"I'll channel more power."

"Two more rats have died. But... ah, I think I've figured it out. The location of the mysterious door they are guarding!"

The Awakener who was sensing the movements of the rats rapidly rolled his eyes behind closed lids and shouted with difficulty. The mood grew tense, but the Sage responded calmly.

"Well done. Now send a rat infused with the blood of a bird there. And Diemon."

"...Yes."

"Your turn. Are you ready?"

Diemon exhaled a shaky breath. He was caught between tremendous fear and exhilaration, knowing that the Sage had faith in him.

'No matter how much the others belittle my abilities, calling them petty and akin to a petty thief, I am the chosen one in the end.'

"Yes. As long as the location is confirmed, I can send the 'little bird' that I've summoned to observe all that happens there."

"Very good."

The sage smiled at Diemon.

"Now! Burst the rat!"

As the shout of the one controlling the rat resounded, everyone in the room felt a minor explosion of energy.

Diemon also closed his eyes, summoning all his strength to fully utilize the 'ability to control monsters' that he had duplicated.

...

Keilusa La Orr abruptly regained consciousness amid faint darkness.

He realized, to his immense surprise, that the terrible pain that had tormented him for so long was no longer there.

'Have I finally died?'

Turning

Chapter 555

If this was death, it was nothing like what Keilusa had long envisioned.

The death he had imagined was never this serene or peaceful.

According to the hidden records of the imperial family, those born with cracked vessels endured horrifying pain. As their lives wore on, the intervals between their bouts of pain grew shorter. When death approached, they would lie in bed for days, unable to rise, suffering immense pain that no analgesic could alleviate.

There were records of them screaming in forms that could no longer be recognized as human, praying for the swift end to it all. Records of those who lost their minds from unbearable pain, becoming gibbering idiots. Records of those who, when even drugs failed to work, attacked the servants who brought the medication and tore at their own flesh like beasts.

Some had stabbed their own bellies and heads, laughing while doing so. A wet nurse had killed herself alongside the young princess when she found out the girl had a cracked vessel. Another young man had clenched his teeth and torn at his nails until they fell off, resembling an old man when he finally passed.

These accounts described a hell where one could think of nothing but death.

So, Keilusa had assumed his end wouldn't be much different. The only distinction between himself and the others would be whether he had lived longer before the cracked vessel became too much. Either way, the end would be the same.

Clinging to a fragile life only for the body to ultimately shatter after the vessel completely broke, dying horribly without even leaving a corpse behind. The coffin would be filled with an intricately crafted dummy, and the reason for his death would be erased from history.

He would die a failure, achieving nothing by his own hands and leaving behind only pain for those who were dear to him.

'...'

As bitterness swelled within him, his mind was instantly filled with thoughts of those precious people.

There was the kindly younger brother who didn't bear a grudge even though he had taken the position once destined for him. Instead, the younger brother had expressed a wish to walk the same path with him, albeit in different places.

The old chief attendant, who had stayed by the Emperor's side since the previous reign, worrying for an Emperor who was still too young and unsure to retire.

His parents, who were no longer with him but had taught him to never settle for reality.

And...

A young, headstrong girl he once thought could bear his child and carry on the future of the empire.

A certain woman who had shaken his heart like no one else had or would.

As he thought of that last person, Keilusa heard a sound like winter winds rustling barren branches.

He had known that woman since she was a girl wearing a dress that reflected the color of water, her cheeks flushed like a peach. Oblivious to the fact that he was the Crown Prince, she had awkwardly smiled while asking for advice on how to gracefully withdraw from the Crown Princess Candidate Test. Because of her smile, a stiff boy who had known nothing beyond books made the choice to hold someone's hand and step out into the world. Through her touch, he realized just how green and expansive this world was.

How many flowers could actually bloom in what he had considered a dead imperial palace.

How grand the trees were and how many butterflies, bees, and birds took refuge in them.

How each dawn, which he thought was always the same, was actually so new.

Through her, he learned of the scents and the beauty of things that he had never realized were never the same twice.

Realizing that if she were gone, he would lose everything all over again, he clung to her with all his might. For the first time in his life, he had been selfish. He begged, he pleaded, and in the end, she took Keilusa's hand.

In Keilusa La Orr's life, she was the most beautiful girl. When they sat beside each other, it felt as if all the darkness in the world retreated, melting away.

Was this serenity the cost of never seeing her again? The moment the thought crossed his mind, he felt an immense pain erupting from an unknown place.

Even within the sanctuary he had longed for, Keilusa realized he wanted to see her face one more time than to bask in this tranquility.

Eyes that twinkled like a calm lake in the sunlight. Hair that was the color of ripe autumn wheat. Lips that were hesitant around people, but could smile more warmly than anyone else.

A face resilient as a flower that, despite being wounded and withering many times, blooms again the following year.

Ah, where could she be?

The last vision of her face was fading. She might have been crying, and he hadn't been there to wipe her tears away. Was he destined to lose her in this darkness, unable even to recall her face, left only to yearn for her forever?

'I don't need such peace,' he thought.

If he could see her once more.

If he could wipe away her flowing tears and tell her that he's at peace now.

Just one more time...

'Really, just once.'

After that, she would find her own peace, and he could endure eternal suffering as the price.

It was at that moment.

"Your Majesty."

He heard a voice.

A jolt of shock went through him. It was her, the woman he had been thinking of so fervently. She was calling out to him from somewhere.

Her voice trembled with sorrow and passion as it repeated, "Your Majesty, Your Majesty," and then finally whispered another name.

"Keilusa."

Ah, what was the point of staying in this serenity any longer?

If he couldn't see her again, no sanctuary would have meaning for Keilusa.

With an earnest heart, Keilusa La Orr called out her name.

Not the awkward name that her adoptive parents had forced upon her, but the single name she was born with.

"Faria."

At that moment, something changed within him.

An invisible seed of transformation instantly blossomed, overturning everything. Even the smallest particles making up his physical body were transformed into something new, as if sprouting from within. Keilusa groaned in tremendous pain.

He instinctively understood that some force was consolidating within him. Although he felt as if he was barely holding together, like tattered cloth, the awakened seed in his body didn't block the pain but rather surged forward, amplifying it.

Shattered fragments came together. Unintelligible sounds pounded his ears like a torrential downpour.

Time and space became indistinguishable as eternity seemed to rush by.

"..."

"Your Majesty!"

The Emperor finally opened his eyes.

It was an inexplicable, mysterious moment.

Yuder reflexively opened his eyes again because of the Emperor's body, which had begun to tremble at an accelerated pace from the moment the Empress's lips touched his. What reflected in his eyes was something entirely different from what others were witnessing.

Kishiar had strained to keep the Emperor's inner red energy from dissipating. But suddenly, it melted away like dissolving powder in water, spreading throughout his body, and then extinguished as if all light had been snuffed out. At first, Kishiar thought his perception had failed and tried to refocus his energy, but Yuder stopped him.

Kishiar's red eyes reflected Yuder's, which still shone with a golden light.

'Is it a failure?'

Just as Kishiar involuntarily held his breath contemplating this, he shook his head.

"...Can you hear it? The noises from outside have ceased."

"..."

"It means those we've trusted to cover our backs have done their part."

Yuder didn't respond, but Kishiar quietly chuckled.

"So, we should do our part as well."

"But I can't see anything. If you are seeing something... Don't you understand?"

"Being unable to see could mean that the light is about to go out, but it could also mean that it's about to come on. Initially, your ability to perceive energy within a person came from the power of the red stone, didn't it?"

"..."

"So, doesn't it make sense to think that your sudden inability to see inside His Majesty might also be caused by the red stone? His Majesty is still breathing. He's merely unconscious, which means he's still alive."

And if he's still alive, anything is possible.

The wheels in Yuder's tired and anxious mind stopped churning at these words. Finally, Yuder exhaled peacefully in front of the man wiping blood off his cheek.

And then, at that very moment—

"Your Majesty!"

With the Empress's cry, the Emperor's fingertips twitched. As he groaned and took a deep breath, a light began to rise from within his relaxed body.

Yuder couldn't take his eyes off the light. The reconstructed flow of light he saw now was entirely different from before.

"What is this...?"

Beneath the Emperor's abdomen, a clump of red light appeared that wasn't there before. It was the red energy Kishiar had been holding onto. The ongoing red energy from within the body began to seep into that clump, and a faint light emanated from all over him.

Yuder realized he was witnessing the moment of someone undergoing an awakening.

Turning

Chapter 556

Even without anyone saying it, one could sense that the Emperor's body was undergoing change—a change that diverged unexpectedly from predictions as soon as it was recognized.

Without a moment's hesitation, Yuder shouted, "Commander, protect the Emperor's vessel with your power!"

Kishiar's ability involved pulling and pushing energies, and so, right after his own awakening, he could instinctively protect his vessel. However, the Emperor's situation was different this time. His body was shaking more precariously than ever as it transformed under the flow of a mysterious power, becoming an Awakener.

This was not a favorable situation. If the Emperor's vessel could not withstand this shaking during his awakening, it might just shatter, Yuder thought. To avoid such an ominous circumstance...

'We must work together to protect the Emperor's vessel by using Kishiar's ability as soon as possible to attract some of the red energy that has begun to condense in the Emperor's body.'

Although this diverged slightly from the original plan, the task was the same. A conviction that this moment could not be missed overwhelmed Yuder.

Simultaneously with Yuder's shout, it seemed Kishiar had the same thought and began to exert his power. The connection between Yuder and him tightened, and the power began moving towards the Emperor's vessel. As it did, blood started to flow anew from Yuder's eyes.

Despite feeling as if the insides of his eyes were being shredded with a knife, Yuder remained unfazed and concentrated his utmost effort.

However...

"The red energies in His Highness' body are too resistant to being pulled together," Kishiar murmured as he exerted even more of his ability. It was just as he said; despite the immense effort, the red energies inside the Emperor weren't being pulled as smoothly as before.

Even if Kishiar was incredibly powerful, he was still human and had his limits. How long could he endure this, and could the Emperor's unstable vessel withstand until he fully awakened?

'No,' Yuder decided calmly. Although time was of the essence and the situation perilous, Kishiar's words helped him regain his composure. No more thoughts of failure. In that fleeting moment, Yuder sifted through every possibility and memory, finally stumbling upon something useful. Clinging onto this glimmer of hope, he spoke up immediately.

"Commander, stop forcing the Emperor's internal energy for now."

"And then?"

"I'll infuse him with some of my own pure energy. We've successfully done this before, have we not?"

"..."

A faint furrow appeared between Kishiar's brows, which had been exerting power continuously.

Of course, Yuder knew that the situation with Kishiar back then was entirely different from the Emperor's current state. Despite the purity of the energy Yuder had absorbed, it wasn't safe to assert that this would pose no risk to someone who was not only not awakened but also had a cracked vessel, vulnerable even to the slightest disturbance.

Previously, they had not considered this method to expedite the Emperor's awakening. However, the Emperor was in the process of becoming an Awakener, and there was a 'connection' active between Kishiar and Yuder that vividly transmitted both senses and emotions. It was worth taking the risk.

Kishiar seemed to have a good guess of what Yuder was thinking, yet he didn't readily agree.

'He must think it's dangerous because I'm using too much of my power.'

The fleeting emotions flowing through his eyes were clearer than ever, thanks to the shaky connection between the two.

‘But in this situation, I can't just look out for my own safety.’

Prioritizing my own safety could provide a moment's respite, perhaps. But here and now, the one exerting more power and taking greater risks wasn't Yuder—it was Kishiar.

Kishiar had plunged into this peril, risking his recently regained health for his sibling. Excluding the Emperor, he had been the most stable pillar in an incredibly unstable situation. Even the Empress, the chief attendant, and finally, even Yuder had relied on his steadfastness; it was no exaggeration to say so.

Although he must've had a strong desire to save his family by any means, the man in front of him didn't show it. Instead, he worried about Yuder, who had suggested a plan.

Who else should he act for, if not for this man? For him?

Not trying everything he could now would result in a lifetime of regret, far outweighing a moment's safety. Yuder wished, more intensely than ever, to achieve something for him.

Even if it meant draining all his remaining energy or bursting his eye, it didn't matter.

Within their exchanged glances, full of this resolve, a few seconds felt unbearably long.

"Will you be alright?"

Finally, Kishiar quietly asked. The short question carried myriad implications. Yuder sensed that Kishiar had read his emotions, and he nodded his head slowly, yet firmly.

"Yes."

"Understood. Let's do it together."

As if they had made a pact, both unleashed their powers simultaneously. Yuder recalled the time he had infused his pure energy into Kishiar and drew upon his power. A crimson vein rapidly spread across the back of his hand, snaking up to his neck and jaw. It felt as if fire, rather than blood, flowed beneath his skin.

The moment the red aura seeping from his fingertips coalesced, Kishiar's power precisely captured and pulled it. The two energies entwined smoothly, then burrowed into the Emperor's inner self.

The Emperor's body shuddered slightly. But the result that soon revealed itself was...

"It worked."

Yuder watched his own pure energy, guided by Kishiar's hand, flow upwards through the Emperor's inner self. It easily glided over the unstable vessel without mixing with the Emperor's other energies. The amount was too insignificant to even mention, but a success was still a success!

A wave of intense joy and relief brushed through his mind, yet it was only the beginning.

Yuder continued to send his power towards Kishiar. The drained energies were pulled and started to form a thin protective layer over Emperor Keilusa's unstable vessel.

"It's still... not enough."

The Emperor's vessel, caught in Kishiar's red aura, had regained some stability, yet it was still pulsating dangerously in sync with its heartbeat. More energy seemed necessary, but the limit was rapidly approaching.

Yuder's face had turned ashen, his concentration reaching an extreme level. Drops of nosebleed trickled down, as his trembling fingers sucked the energy out of him and his vision flickered in and out. Unbeknownst to him, he had almost collapsed; it was only when Kishiar grabbed and steadied him that he realized how close he had come.

"Yuder."

"Ah, I apologize."

"It can't go on like this."

"No, we can't stop now. The vessel is not yet complete."

"You're putting yourself at risk."

"No, I am..."

Yuder's gaze shifted to the almost completed Emperor's vessel. It was radiating with red energy, similar to Kishiar's. It was so close to being fully shielded that he couldn't afford to stop now.

Yuder clenched his teeth in regret, thinking, if only I could harness the pure power of the red stone better, more efficiently.

'Just a little more!'

Just a bit more power to save the Emperor and Kishiar.

Whooooo...

That's when it happened.

Yuder sensed a familiar yet new energy tapping into him. Looking around, he saw a red glow emanating from a basket on the Emperor's desk not too far away.

Realizing what the mediums inside the basket could do, he shouted, "Commander! Please bring those stones over here!"

Kishiar immediately reached out. Driven by an invisible force, the stones flew from the overturned basket. Yuder caught one in mid-air, gripping it tightly.

As soon as he did, the red power inside the stone flared, absorbing into his palm like a bolt of hot lightning. Yuder, gasping for air, exclaimed, "These stones can amplify the power, and I can absorb it. Commander, you too, hurry..."

The drained energy began replenishing, his body feeling as if it were set ablaze. Yet, it didn't feel painful. Yuder was relieved to see that even Kishiar, holding a similar stone, seemed far stronger than before.

The red energy that had drained them both finally completed the Emperor's protective shield.

As the shield stabilized under Kishiar's influence, the Emperor's vessel solidified, signifying the Emperor's transformation into an Awakener.

Yuder dumbly watched as Emperor Kailusa's lips twitched and his eyelids began to flutter open.

This moment felt incredibly special, even to him who had changed so much in his previous life and the present.

Perhaps it was because of Kishiar, who was unable to take his eyes off the Emperor's disheveled face, just like Yuder.

"Faria..."

"Ah... Ahh..."

With a cry that wasn't quite words, the Empress burst into tears, burying her face in the Emperor's embrace. The chief attendant, guarding the door, fell to his knees, unable to lift his head before this

miracle. The Emperor, with dazed eyes, looked at his wife and eventually moved his trembling fingers to embrace her.

Moments later, his gaze slowly shifted towards Kishiar and Yuder sitting on either side of him. His cracked lips twitched faintly. Although he made no sound, Yuder easily understood the word he wanted to say.

Thank you.

As if to celebrate the moment, a loud explosion echoed from somewhere outside the room.

And then there was silence.

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‘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 557

Kanna, Gakane, and Nathan pursued and captured the rats at an unbelievably fast pace. It was natural that the two members of the Cavalry worked well together; they had trained in tandem for a long time. Added to this was Nathan Zuckerman's exceptional skill, which knew no bounds, making their operation seamless.

Even in a complex environment, with just one signal from Kanna, Nathan Zuckerman managed to kill the small and fast enemy with a single stroke of his sword. His movements, targeting only the objective without destroying anything else, were so smooth that it made it all look trivial.

Moreover, although he wasn't an imperial guard of the palace, Nathan seemed incredibly familiar with its internal layout. There was no hint of condescension in his voice as he clearly guided them on which routes to take and which areas must be secured.

After dealing with most of the rats, they took a moment to catch their breath behind a bronze lion statue, which Nathan had identified as a crucial area. As Kanna was tracking the remaining rats, Gakane cautiously asked,

"Is the place where Yuder is... alright?"

"Considering we've received no signal from the Duke, it should be fine," Nathan explained, implying that Kishiar had judged that they needn't concern themselves with external matters.

Gakane felt both relieved and burdened, believing that they had more or less done a good job.

'Yuder must be somewhere behind this area along with the Emperor and the Commander...'

They had been suddenly assigned to guard the Sun Palace without even being given detailed information. And Yuder seemed to be more deeply involved in this mission than ever.

The Sun Palace was the Emperor's residence. Even without asking, it was obvious that the Emperor was the ultimate focus of today's mission. The invaders would most likely be targeting wherever the Emperor was, and Yuder's decision to go inside rather than remain outside was probably because it was deemed more critical and dangerous.

The appearance of invaders in the Sun Palace today had already confirmed that the choices made by the Emperor and the Commander were correct.

"Kanna, is it getting difficult to chase the remaining rats?"

"They seem to have figured out what we're trying to guard, and their speed is increasing. It's becoming hard to read them. Only a couple are left now."

It was natural that the enemy would also not just sit idly by. The rats were constantly trying to evade their pursuit and find something. However, Kanna was just quicker at reading them.

"Don't overdo it."

"Mm-hmm."

As she murmured and shifted her downcast eyes this way and that, Kanna appeared almost entranced. It would have been a somewhat frightening sight to others, but Gakane was rather pleased.

Only those who have undergone the same awakening could understand the freedom and pleasure felt when a previously unresponsive ability finally breaks through its limits. Knowing that Kanna was in that state, he didn't want to disturb her.

The only concern was that with each use of her abilities, the handkerchief she used to block her nose was becoming increasingly stained. If it really became a problem, he planned to just knock her out.

'After all, it's just about searching for the rats... It may not be as fast as Kanna, but spreading my shadow as wide as possible should do the trick.'

“They’ll be coming this way soon!”

Kanna lifted her head and pointed in one direction. Without hesitation, Gakane unfurled his shadow. In the blink of an eye, Nathan Zuckerman approached the area Kanna had indicated and skewered a rat that was just emerging from the darkness. The rat, even after being pierced, tried to escape, but failed to break through the gap sealed by Gakane's shadow and was torn apart like a fish caught in a net.

"Keep running in the same direction! Don't give them a chance to escape! It might look like one, but it's actually two!"

Kanna sprang to her feet and ran. They located another rat attempting to sneak up the stairs from below. It was incredibly fast, almost as if it had been conserving all its energy for this very moment, escaping just before Gakane could close the gap with his shadow.

"Gakane, hurry!"

While Nathan Zuckerman killed one rat, before the second rat could scurry behind a bronze lion statue, Gakane mustered all his strength and expanded his shadow.

'I'm not too late...'

Barely catching the rat's tail, a pitch-black shadow surged upwards. Gakane immediately wrapped the rat in his shadow and shattered it.

'Done. This is the end.'

So far, so good. They were also prepared to eliminate the red glow that usually emerged from the bodies of the dead rats.

But what flowed from the rat's corpse wasn't the red glow; it was dark liquid.

"...What?"

With a sound like an exploding ball, the blood splattered across the corridor. At the same time, Kanna's eyes widened, and she screamed.

"Monster blood!"

"What?!"

"It's not the rat's blood. The rat had ingested monster blood... They've been targeting this location from the start... A signal? Is that the meaning of the signal? If that's the case..."

"Something is coming."

As Kanna's gaze darted erratically, she finally locked onto a window next to a statue. Nathan Zuckerman also turned his head towards the same spot.

At that moment, the moonlight streaming through the window began to be obscured by a dark shadow. It wasn't due to clouds. Gakane noticed an unidentifiable black shadow outside the window, flapping its wings and staring at them.

'What is that...?'

The creature had disheveled fur and skin, like a bird freshly hatched from an egg. However, its wings were strong and large. The body was disproportionately small, but dozens of dark eyes were embedded all over it, each eye independently rolling to look in different directions.

An instinctual shiver ran down his spine upon realizing that those dozens of eyes were watching him. Such a creature couldn't possibly be a normal, living beast.

It was a monster.

"Do you remember that creature from the monster manual we studied? Gakane?"

Kanna murmured softly.

"A monster that can locate its target regardless of darkness, walls, fog, or obstructions."

With wings that spewed venom and long claws, its frail body was well-protected, and hundreds of eyes ensured it never lost sight of its target. It ate creatures smaller than itself, so smelling the blood of the same monster in front of it was like a taboo.

The image from the manual they had studied during training merged with the monster before them.

'It's smaller than the one in the manual... but comparing it to a chicken or a pigeon would be an insult to those birds.'

"How could a monster be in the palace..."

"The important thing is to prevent that creature from entering and violating our territory!"

Kanna's eyes bulged as she shouted.

"I can sense it. There's another enemy behind that monster!"

"So you're saying that monster is also being controlled, like the rats and the other knights?"

At Nathan Zuckerman's inquiry, Kanna nodded her head, then hesitated a moment later.

"I can sense the presence of another Awakener, but it's different from earlier! That monster just woke up from its egg because it smelled blood. And when we brought the egg here... I think it's watching us through its eyes. I can read some information from its gaze."

"More than anything, I'm certain that we need to find out what's behind all this," Nathan Zuckerman said as he took a deep breath and raised his sword.

"May I ask one more question? Are there other monsters besides this one?"

"No, I don't think so. I can only feel... that creature."

"Understood. Deputy Commander Wand, step back and read as much information as you can from that monster. I'll take it from here."

"It's dangerous, Sir Zuckerman. I'll help you!"

Gakane stepped forward, but Nathan Zuckerman shook his head.

"Guarding the area where the Deputy Commander Wand and the bronze statue are is far more important than attacking. It's something that can't be done with a sword, so I'll leave that task to you."

"But if you get a scratch and inflicted by its poison...!"

Concerned, Gakane looked back at Nathan Zuckerman, who appeared to be mulling over what to say. A moment later, he spoke words that were quite surprising.

"Actually, the Monster Manual you both studied from the Cavalry is based on combat records from our own Peletta Knights. I've faced that monster multiple times. So, there's no need to worry so much. This is the best way to quickly end this."

"What?"

"What you are about to witness... please keep it a secret."

"What are you... planning to do?"

Before his words were fully out, the monster crashed through the window. Reflexively, Gakane summoned a shadow clone to block the shattered glass and grabbed Kanna with another shadow clone, rushing her to safety.

"Ugh!"

After tumbling to a somewhat safe spot, both Gakane and Kanna cautiously lifted their heads. And they were stunned to see a vivid blue aura emanating from Nathan Zuckerman's sword as he blocked the monster's claws.

"My God..."

It was, indeed, an overwhelming battle.

Every time Nathan Zuckerman swung his sword, an impossibly blue light sliced through the monster's body, bursting dozens of its eyes.

Though it might look similar to the sword auras of Jimmy or other skilled swordsmen, the outcome was entirely different. An overwhelming energy lingered at the tip of his sword, reminiscent of ancient Swordmasters who were said to have split mountains with their blades alone.

With a single swing, a crack appeared on the monster's unbreakable wing. On the second, the blade penetrated the crack, tearing off one side. The monster splattered black blood and thrashed about, unable to fly any longer, crashing to the ground with a thud that echoed through the entire palace.

Nathan Zuckerman, splattered with a bit of the poisonous black blood, advanced towards the monster with his aura-wreathed sword.

A single, flawless attack.

With a terrible sound, the monster's weak point, a red eye, exploded. Hidden among its black eyes and steel-like feathers, it burst open, followed by an immense booming noise as the monster's body exploded.

"Be careful!"

All three were knocked back by the backlash of the explosion, and the windows in the corridor shattered, bringing down the chandelier.

"Ugh...!"

After the aftermath of the explosion had passed, Gakane slowly lifted his head to survey the surroundings. Fortunately, no one else was injured. It was thanks to Gakane that, just before the explosion, he had stretched his shadow to its limit to protect everyone.

The other shadow clone, tightly holding Kanna, continued to act as a cushion to keep her from harm. In front of Nathan Zuckerman, a wall of shadow that had blocked the poison stood firmly, swaying slightly. Nathan picked up the sword where the aura had disappeared and turned his head towards Gakane.

"Thank you. You blocked it well."

"Ouch, ouch... If it wasn't for your shadow clone, Gakane, my head would've been smashed."

'...I survived.'

Only then did Gakane realize that he had accomplished the last thing he needed to do and collapsed to the ground in relief. What was reflected in his eyes behind the bronze lion statue was utterly clean. Unlike the mess created by the explosion, it seemed as if nothing had happened there.

Seeing that, Gakane couldn't help but lift the corners of his mouth. Though it seemed like an inappropriate moment, he found no other way to express this sense of achievement.

They had completely fulfilled the mission they were entrusted with.

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Turning

Chapter 558

The sights before his eyes were all distorted.

Gripping his chest, Yuder trembled in the face of an indescribable, horrific sensation. Suddenly, he took a deep breath, feeling as if he'd lost touch with what he had been doing up to that moment.

What just happened?

What occurred?

He couldn't say. All he felt was an emptiness in his chest, as if something had been forcibly ripped out, and a chill as if a wind blew through the void.

But he couldn't be injured; that much was clear.

As he blinked in a daze, the dreadful sensations gradually faded like illusions. When even the fact that he had felt such things started to seem like a lie, Yuder finally realized where he was.

The smell of dark, stagnant water wafted through the closed windows.

He was in the castle of the Duke of Peletta, where the Duke resided. Yuder stood perfectly upright, sword in hand.

And before him was,

"..."

A man sitting and bleeding from his chest. His golden locks fell over a pale forehead.

The man neither moved nor spoke. He simply sat there, as if momentarily asleep.

It was obvious to anyone that he had already drawn his last breath. Yuder continued to stare blankly at the scene before finally lowering his eyes to see his own hand. His body, hand, and the tip of his sword were all a mess, splattered with blood.

At last, everything became clear.

Yuder had successfully completed the Emperor's first mission. The Duke of Peletta had met his end as the Emperor had desired; all that remained was to discard the weapon and escape.

Yuder let go of his sword. The cheap, standard-issue blade clattered heavily to the ground. Anyone who examined it would be unable to identify the assailant.

He turned his back and walked away. Passing by a hearth whose fire had long been extinguished, he felt an inexplicable chill crawl up his spine.

As if he had left something crucial behind...

"..."

Yuder suddenly opened his eyes. His face was damp. He took a deep breath, and as he waved his hand, someone gently grasped his arm and lowered it.

"Easy there. You seem disoriented; I was just trying to adjust your posture."

"Commander?"

His own voice sounded foreign, even to him. Yuder swallowed the dry cough bursting from his parched throat and looked up at Kishiar's face.

His hair was a mess, soaked in sweat, and his red eyes revealed deep exhaustion. But his cheeks still radiated a lingering warmth and emotional vitality. The moment their eyes met, the creeping chill retreated like a mirage.

Looking away, Yuder saw the Emperor lying down, the Empress holding his hand and speaking softly. Attendants bustled about, wiping the Emperor's face and hands with hot towels.

'Ah... I must have almost fainted again.'

Only then did Yuder realize that Kishiar was holding a wet towel in his other hand. Kishiar had apparently wiped the blood-stained face of Yuder the moment he awoke.

'In front of the Emperor and Empress, how could I...?'

In an instant, Yuder's consciousness snapped back to reality. He sat up, his head lowered, on a sofa a short distance from the Emperor's bed. Technically, he was more reclined against Kishiar than sitting upright. Yet, none of the esteemed individuals near the bed seemed to mind or even consider it inappropriate.

"The Emperor has fully awakened, and I've severed our connection. The protective force covering the vessel is also perfectly effective. I'm not sure how long my power will last on others, but it should be fine for a while," Kishiar said. He added that if any issues arose, he would immediately come to reinforce the pulling force.

"I've received signals from Nathan and the others. There were unexpected intruders, but they've been dealt with. Once the remaining evidence is sorted, I'll come up and give you a detailed report."

"That's a relief," Yuder responded.

"Yes, it is. The future looks promising."

Kishiar mumbled something about 'expectation' being a curious word and silently smiled toward the Emperor. While one couldn't guess all the layers of time and emotion stacked in that smile, it was clear that joy was the most significant part.

Yuder quietly stared at his face. From the moment he had resolved to accomplish this task, he had wanted to see that face. Even though he felt drained to the point of death, he didn't feel particularly parched.

"... Thank you for keeping both your promise with the Emperor and with me,"

Those words arrived at Yuder's ears a bit late as he had been lost in Kishiar's face.

"I wanted to say this as soon as you woke up," Kishiar said, lowering his head to kiss Yuder's hand. "I'll never forget what we've accomplished with these hands. Nor should you."

"..."

"We should leave soon. Once we return, we should first get you checked... get you treated, and then you'll let me express my feelings to you as much as I want."

Kishiar's request, polite yet filled with desperate longing, seemed to ignite a spark within Yuder's heart. Yuder looked down at the warmth of the hand holding his and nodded.

"Yes, but you should also get checked and treated."

"Of course."

During the brief moment when his consciousness had wavered, Yuder had felt a faint chill. Kishiar was unaware of this, which was a small comfort to Yuder.

Perhaps the memory resurfaced now because he had been strongly connected to Kishiar throughout the day. It was fortunate that the 'connection' did not persist long after he lost consciousness.

Otherwise, Kishiar might have sensed and shared something more.

Yuder let out a soft sigh and changed the subject.

"By the way, did the Emperor mention what ability he has awakened?"

"He seemed preoccupied and didn't specify. He only said he wanted to see the Empress and then fell asleep."

Kishiar spoke casually of the Emperor's intimate moments, showing no signs of embarrassment. It seemed he thought Yuder should naturally know.

"Ah, I see."

"Once he wakes up and stabilizes, he will surely send word."

It was Emperor Keilusa's awakening ability. Yuder reflected on his experiences over time. Siblings often awoke to similar abilities, but given that Kishiar's ability was somewhat unique, it was difficult to guess the Emperor's ability as well.

"If it were a specialized ability in defense or protection like Prince Ejain, it would certainly make life easier in the future... I can only wonder."

The answer came to them shortly after they returned to the Cavalry.

It was through a letter sent by the Emperor, employing his own "eyes" and "ears."

...

"So... no one knows for sure what happened at the Sun Palace that day, and the only ones who could have infiltrated were the healers. And even then, they caused an unforeseen disaster."

"I apologize, Your Grace."

Duke Diarca looked down at his subordinates with a colder expression than ever. The nobles surrounding him bowed their heads, avoiding eye contact as if they had nothing to say.

"You fools allowed a monster into the Imperial Palace, providing the Emperor's side with an excuse. My clear instructions were merely to discreetly gather information on the internal situation. How was my message conveyed to lead to such an incident?"

"That is..."

Eyes exchanged glances amongst the people; many were filled with fear. When Duke Diarca clicked his tongue, that terror spread even more.

"Regardless of what the Emperor's side discovers, it can be dismissed as their own reckless action. But we must find out who conveyed my intentions to them at that time and why this act was committed. Who is currently in contact with them?"

"...I am."

"Baron Renbow."

Baron Renbow, who had taken over the communication between the healers and Duke Diarca after the now-absent Baron Durmand, raised his hand with a relatively calm face.

"Speak. Why did this happen?"

"Your Grace, your instructions were clearly and accurately conveyed to them, without addition or omission. I can swear it on my name and faith."

"And yet?"

"According to them, this incident may appear as a failure on the surface, but it is actually not so."

Duke Diarca's eyebrows twitched in displeasure. The surrounding nobles murmured among themselves.

"Not so?"

"Yes. There is someone leading them, referred to as the 'Sage.' He has requested an audience with you, Your Grace. He wishes to report directly to you on the information gathered from this incident."

"A presumptuous and dangerous individual..."

"How dare he..."

The whispers that had been rising fell silent with a small thump against Duke Diarca's chair.

The elderly Duke did not, as the nobles had anticipated, erupt in anger or leave his seat. He stared thoughtfully at Baron Renbow for a moment before speaking.

"If he dares to speak out even after causing such a major mishap, he must be confident that he has something of significance."

"..."

"Very well. Tell him to come."

"Are you sure, Your Grace? To allow such lowly people to—"

"Wouldn't it be better to dispose of them right away?"

Ignoring the nobles' words, Duke Diarca shook his head.

"Regardless, they are the ones treating the Crown Prince. I've been curious, so let's see their faces first before making a decision."

"Very well, Your Highness."

Baron Renbow respectfully bowed his head. No one noticed the momentary glint of confusion in his eyes, nor did they realize that as soon as the conversation ended, he immediately headed to the

quarters where the 'healers' were staying. There, he knelt before the Sage and relayed everything that had transpired.

Turning

Chapter 559

Everyone knew that Emperor Keilusa had long suffered from a mysterious chronic illness.

Ever since the carriage accident that occurred during the Crown Prince Selection Test, the Emperor had rarely left the Sun Palace, keeping a low profile as if he were sequestering himself away.

Though on significant matters, he would express his opinions through written decrees and move his ministers to fulfill his intentions, that was all there was to it.

Rumors circulated that the Emperor's illness was a horrific skin disease or even a form of madness. However, no one knew the exact truth. Even Duke Peletta, who had returned to the capital and resumed his normal activities since the Emperor's reclusion, kept silent on the matter.

The House of Diarca, who had taken the Crown Prince's position, seemed endlessly at ease. The Empress, who appeared in public events in place of the Emperor, grew visibly more pale as the days passed. People inferred from these changes that Emperor Keilusa's chronic illness was incurable.

What was there to fear from a man who was, after all, soon to die? And what need was there to resist whatever he might do?

The imperial family's authority had been waning for decades, making it difficult to contend with the four major ducal houses. Even Emperor Keilusa, who had earned high expectations since his days as a prince for his eloquent speech and sharp mind, found it difficult to overturn the power dynamics that had been suppressed since ancestral times.

Needless to say, that was all the more true now that he had acquired a fatal illness.

The imperial family was no longer the formidable entity it had been hundreds of years ago. Under the influence of Dukes like Diarca, who aimed to empower the nobility further, the Orr system, originally a

stable cooperation between the officials who followed the Emperor and the territorial lords who had inherited lands generationally, gradually lost its strength.

The stature of the ducal houses was evident in the titles they bore, no less significant than those of a Crown prince. The imperial knights, who should protect the imperial family, were filled with individuals more concerned with their own families and interests.

The numerous nobles who commanded vast lands took advantage of the chaos to ignore cooperation with officials and further their own gains. It was the first time in Orr's thousand-year history that the nobles' power had been so great.

'After all, the current Emperor will soon be gone. We must seize all the benefits we can before a new imperial family rises.'

Once established, such perceptions are not easily changed.

Even if the Emperor invested effort into establishing the Cavalry, specialized in monster extermination, even if he commanded a stricter investigation into the activities of the Apeto and other ducal houses, even when he made an appearance at a palace party for the first time in years, few considered it a serious threat.

This was the same even when the following news leaked out of the Sun Palace:

'A monster has appeared within the Sun Palace, attempting to harm the Emperor. We will find and bring to justice the perpetrator and those behind this crime.'

Such incidents used to be fairly common. Back when Emperor Keilusa was actively keeping the ducal houses in check, the Sun Palace and Dawn Palace had seen their share of various suspicious and dangerous events.

But this time, they said a monster had appeared in the Sun Palace.

And it had to happen right after the newly established Cavalry celebrated solving an abnormal monster occurrence in the western region—of all the places, a monster had to appear in the Sun Palace.

It was an attack rife with symbolism, evident to anyone who saw it.

"Remarkable, really, Duke Diarca is putting on quite a show, especially considering the end isn't far off."

"This is obviously a response to the humiliation they suffered at the party, at the hands of the Cavalry. Revealing this level of defiance as the Emperor's end approaches is rather alarming."

"Obvious, maybe, but they'll just cut off the tail and be done with it. That's just how Diarca operates."

Right on cue, whispers flowed from within the Sun Palace that the Emperor's chronic illness had deteriorated further since the failed assassination attempt. People were certain they hadn't been wrong to fear Duke Diarca. Meanwhile, they expected the Cavalry and Duke Peletta, who had relied solely on the Emperor, to be more circumspect.

"...Kishiar. Did you find the letter I sent entertaining?"

Emperor Keilusa lay half-reclined on his bed, engaging with his brother, seemingly more relaxed than ever.

"I was genuinely surprised. I always thought you were never one for jokes, Your Majesty, but I have to admit this one got me."

"I suppose. I was quite shocked myself when I first realized this power."

A faint smile crossed the Emperor's face, but vanished just as quickly.

"As I demonstrated through that letter, I can temporarily transfer my sight and hearing to any object I touch. Whoever receives that object becomes visible and audible to me, even as I sit still."

The letter Kishiar had received from the Emperor while he was with the Cavalry seemed no different from any previous correspondence. Except for the peculiar line: "As soon as you receive this, speak out loud any question you wish to ask me. However, it should be a question only I can answer."

Kishiar realized that this was related to the Emperor's newfound abilities. The serious question he and Yuder eventually settled on was, 'May we send more dresses to Her Majesty, the Empress?' And within an hour, a new letter arrived with the message, 'No purple dresses. Also, give Baron Aile a break.'

The reply was eerily accurate, as if the Emperor had been watching all along.

"Did you discover this ability thanks to the Empress?"

"...Let's just say that's the case."

After the Empress had left his side to return to her own palace, the Emperor found himself missing her as usual. But then something wholly different happened—her voice and figure appeared before him, thanks to some mysterious power. The shock nearly had him tumbling out of bed.

The power didn't last long, but after several trials, the Emperor quickly realized just how formidable this newfound ability was.

"I still don't know how to maintain this power for an extended period, or how it could be further utilized. But in our current circumstances, it will surely be helpful."

"Indeed, especially for gauging the reactions of those who mistakenly believe Your Majesty's illness to be far more severe."

"I've already sent it out."

"Of course, you had to."

In the brief moment their eyes met, familiar emotions swirled between the brothers. Though in varying degrees, both wore similarly chilly smiles.

"I've already discovered something interesting. I initially found the failed invasion odd, as it seemed inconsistent with Duke Diarca's usual tactics. But judging by the reactions, it appears it wasn't something he intended after all."

"Ah, so that was the case."

Their eyes met once more, the space between them filled with the intricate fabric of emotions and secrets they had always shared.

Intruders had entered the Sun Palace through a multitude of pathways. It was clear that information had leaked about that day, but it was also evident that they were unaware of the specifics of what would transpire here. Had they known, they wouldn't have ventured so recklessly, poking around and threatening; they would have opted for a far more reliable method.

"The same conclusion was reached based on the investigations by Nathan and members of the Cavalry," Kishiar continued. "All of the ordinary people who came in through other routes were all filtered out at the knight's lines. We believe that the Awakeners who managed to stay and breach our defenses are responsible for this incident."

"Have we identified these individuals?"

"According to Kanna, it appears that one of them had the ability to block information. Controlling both animals and humans, another Awakener seemed to be enhanced by a third party, making it difficult to trace back to their point of origin. It will take a bit more time to understand the individuals involved."

"Even with an Awakener who can read information, they are this elusive? They must have moved with extreme caution. They didn't even know that we would call in the Cavalry..."

Emperor Keilusa stroked his chin, his eyes behind his glasses flickering with numerous speculations. Compared to before, when merely maintaining his physical form was draining, his gaze was incomparably clearer.

"But you seem to have some suspicions."

"It's hard to fool your sagacious eyes, Your Majesty."

Kishiar let out a wry smile.

"Technically, it was not me, but my assistant who has identified a prime suspect. An Awakener group that we've been tracking for unrelated reasons is currently by the Crown Prince's side. While we don't know their objective yet, there is a high probability that they lent temporary aid for this occasion."

The Duke of Diarca had been in contact with a significant number of Awakeners before the incident. Given that they had been expanding their forces and contracting mercenaries, one of them being responsible seemed highly likely.

However, Yuder pointed out different individuals. Kishiar's invaluable assistant, who was now likely resting semi-forcibly within the Cavalry, had pinpointed the most suspicious people based on his personal investigations conducted over time within the unit.

'If we are to find Awakeners capable of this within the Duke of Diarca's circle, then these are the ones I find exceedingly suspicious.'

Those identified were the Awakener healers treating the Crown Prince. Their true identities were the dangerous Awakener that the Cavalry and Peletta Knights were currently tracking—originating from the Star of Nagran, where the "Sage" they followed also seemed to be present.

The Emperor nodded slowly after hearing Kishiar's explanation.

"Indeed, we should investigate them as well."

"They have been residing in the Bright Palace since the day before the intrusion. A rather interesting coincidence."

"I'm not interested in coincidences. Nevertheless, it will make it easier to investigate using this power."

"Wouldn't they make excellent practice targets?"

"For now, I plan to feign being indisposed to observe those around me. Make sure you sync up your actions accordingly."

"Leave it to me."

A flawless smile spread across Kishiar's face. However, as the Emperor stared at him, he slightly furrowed his brows and tilted his head.

"By the way, Kishiar."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Have you had trouble sleeping since that day?"

The sudden question was so sharp that even Kishiar couldn't help but show a momentary lapse. The leisurely smile on Kishiar La Orr's face briefly faltered before returning to its original state.

"Why do you ask such a question?"

"Don't pretend you don't know. I might not be able to read other people's eyes, but it's hard to deceive me. If you're not feeling well, say so."

Only then did Kishiar's expression change slightly. He erased the hopeful look he had been wearing while discussing the upcoming events. What emerged instead was a subtle and slightly weary gaze, as if even he himself didn't know what to say.

"No, that's not the issue."

"Then what is?"

"...I had a rather strange dream."

"A dream?"

The Emperor asked, his expression slightly puzzled as this was the first time he had heard his brother cite such a reason. A penetrating gaze scanned Kishiar's face, trying to determine if he was telling the truth or lying.

"Yes, a dream. To be frank, it was more like a nightmare. That's probably why I seemed a bit fatigued."

Kishiar smiled as he rubbed his forehead.

Turning

Chapter 560

Hearing that, the Emperor finally judged his brother's words to be true. A younger brother whose ability to mask his sincerity with deceit was perhaps even more remarkable than his hidden swordsmanship. Yet, there was no trace of a smile in his eyes now.

'If it's gotten to this point, he must have had an extraordinary dream.'

Kishiar hadn't elaborated on what dream he had. The Emperor felt no compulsion to press him on the matter.

Instead, the Emperor let out a brief sigh and spoke in his usual calm tone.

"You've recently exerted yourself on my behalf; your body may not yet be fully recovered. If you suddenly had a bad dream, it's likely an extension of that. You should go back and rest for today."

"Aren't there still matters left to discuss?"

"It can wait. These are issues I can handle on my own."

As if sensing something in those words, Kishiar lifted his head. For a rare moment, the Emperor's face relaxed into a smile.

"Don't I have a lot of time now?"

Both brothers understood the implications of that statement better than anyone else.

"The human heart is indeed fickle. I thought I was certain about my plans, the reasons for them, and my own desires. But upon reflection, I realize that's not entirely true."

Kishiar's eyelids twitched. The words were the same as when he had brought Yuder to the dinner table to persuade the Emperor. Returning those words, the Emperor looked immensely relieved as he spoke his final words.

"You've helped me so far, now it's time for the reverse. If you find it hard to rest because of bad dreams or if you have something you want to say, contact me anytime."

Kishiar didn't respond immediately. After closing and opening his eyes slowly several times, the man finally let out a deep sigh and a laugh.

"Thank you for your concern for brother. Finally, it feels real that you have returned to yourself."

"Ah, before you go, take that with you."

The Emperor's gaze shifted to a small box that had been on the table even before Kishiar arrived. The box was marked with a cryptic symbol recognizable only to those who knew the code.

"Is this from Nelarn?"

"Yes. A recent letter from Prince Ejain to Baron Aile was in the dispatch. The artifact we talked about came with it... As you know, I no longer have a need for it. Still, it might be useful for study, so I'd like you to take it."

Ever since safely returning to his homeland, Nelarn's second prince, Ejain, had been sending frequent correspondence for cooperation. Through close collaboration with him, the Emperor had successfully thwarted the ascension to the throne of other princes from Nelarn who had alliances with the aristocratic factions within his own Orr Empire.

'Although the king still holds on for now... If Prince Ejain solidifies his power base like this, a declaration of surrender won't be far off.'

After returning to Nelarn, Prince Ejain acted with unprecedented resolve. Trusting and appointing those who would truly side with him, he effectively reined in internal enemies, consolidating power swiftly.

Initially lacking only the confidence and resolve, the prince had already earned the broad trust of his people. Once that gap was filled, everything else followed smoothly, as if wings had been added.

Although surrounding nations seemed eager to dip their toes into the internal strife of Nelarn, hoping to benefit from its turmoil, they were unlikely to gain anything. Emperor Keilusa recalled the prince's last letter, which had read, "I expect to resolve all matters within a few months without a civil war, and I shall never forget the help we have exchanged."

Contrary to expectations that the situation in Nelarn would escalate into a full-blown civil war among the princes, it had come to an incredibly quick and stable conclusion.

Nelarn was not a vast country in terms of landmass, but its excellent climate and geography had made it a stable core among the small western countries throughout its long history. Although it had recently seen many of its citizens depart due to various problems, this would become a thing of the past once Prince Ejain ascended the throne.

Emperor Keilusa hoped that the prince would become a steadfast ally and was thoroughly satisfied with the current outcome. Blocking the western countries, including Nelarn, where the corrupt nobles of Orr could profit, would undoubtedly benefit the Emperor.

The Emperor felt fairly pleased with these thoughts, but the expression on Kishiar's face seemed somewhat more downcast than before as he picked up and opened a box.

"Is something bothering you?" The Emperor wondered, turning his gaze back to the box.

"Your Majesty, has the prince manifested his second gender?" Kishiar's voice filled the Emperor's ears.

"Hmm? Ah, yes... I believe I did hear something about that. He encountered an enemy at the time of manifestation but was unharmed. How did you know?"

"I sensed the scent. The prince's second gender is likely Alpha."

"You can discern that so clearly?"

Though the Emperor himself was an Awakener, he had not manifested a second gender; the concept remained somewhat foreign to him. A bit startled, he looked at Kishiar's face and hesitated for a moment.

Information about Prince Ejain receiving much assistance from Yuder Aile during his perilous journey back to his homeland and becoming friends with him crossed the Emperor's mind.

Yuder Aile was not only the close assistant that his brother uncharacteristically cherished but also a brave soul who had risked his own life to save the Emperor's.

Moreover, Yuder had been the only one to dance with his brother in the middle of the imperial palace.

The only reason that remarkable event had been somewhat accepted among the people was that the two had different second genders...

"..."

Who was Kishiar?

He was someone who had merely smiled when robbed of his rightful position as Crown Prince through covert arrangements and deceitful schemes by the former Empress Dowager. Even in the harsh and desolate lands of Peletta, he had not blamed anyone. He had diligently turned the worthless soil into valuable land.

'So he could have that expression.'

Even though he had felt it through his eyes and skin, everything that seemed so unlikely became astonishingly real for the first time.

The Emperor vividly remembered Kishiar's face when he first opened his eyes after awakening. Kishiar had been holding Yuder, who had been bleeding from his eyes and nose, in his arms.

His gaze was a mess, trembling at his own fingertips, yet he never let go of the other person in his arms. Instead, he rested his head and ceaselessly wiped his blood. That gaze, which had seemed like a fleeting illusion back then, as he had quickly lost consciousness once more, now seemed to reappear here.

Of course, it was but a fleeting moment, barely noticeable except to the Emperor, who knew him as his own flesh and blood. Kishiar soon picked up the box containing the relic and the letter, replying, 'Since I was going to examine it anyway, I might as well take it.'

"Then I shall take my leave. Your Majesty, please prioritize your health over all else."

"Very well. Once the health of Baron Aile improves, come back. Although I cannot openly grant you a reward, I do wish to convey my gratitude."

After his brother left, the Emperor sighed softly.

Because they were of the same bloodline, he knew for certain. There was no more need to probe or question. His younger brother was completely sincere.

Yuder turned his head at the sound of a knock on the door.

The person who entered, holding a bowl of watery soup and a grim expression, was Enon.

"Here's lunch. Eat."

The way he spoke, it sounded less like something a pharmacist would say to a patient and more like what a jailer would say to a prisoner.

"I was going to go downstairs to eat."

"Just eat it. You're better off not moving to stabilize your eyes."

Arguing with Enon didn't seem like a wise choice, especially considering his already foul mood after learning what Yuder had been up to. Taking the hint from past experiences, Yuder obediently accepted the large bowl of soup. For some reason, it seemed to be made of the same material as the washbasin in the room. Neither the giver nor the receiver commented on this.

"While you're eating, look up here."

"..."

"Follow my finger with just your eyes."

Yuder obediently followed Enon's moving finger with his eyes. The eye that had been bleeding was still a bit swollen, but it was significantly better than before.

"It seems you're mostly healed."

"I told you so."

"Still, you should take your medicine. Also, there's something else we need to talk about."

"What is it?"

"It's about that troublesome task you requested."

It wasn't difficult to figure out what he meant: the healers of the Crown Prince who had been investigated by the intelligence unit. In other words, a matter related to the Star of Nagran. Yuder paused in his eating, prompting a sharp warning from Enon.

"Don't stop. I'll tell you after you've finished."

"Fine."

Only after emptying the large bowl of soup under watchful eyes, and consuming a heap of medicine, did Enon finally open his mouth as he had promised.

"While you guys were separately keeping tabs on those fellows, I also made my inquiries with the help of some contacts. Although there's nothing particularly spectacular, I did hear one interesting thing. Whether it's true or not, I can't say yet."

"Let's decide that later. Tell me."

"It's about the leader of those guys, the one they called Sage. I heard he used to live in the capital."