

## Turning 581

Turning

### Chapter 581

On the surface, nothing seemed amiss. The conversations were all seemingly innocuous.

However, through Yuder's watchful eyes, Kishiar's manner of dealing with Katchian was glaringly apparent.

At the moment, Kishiar was treating Katchian in the same manner as Katchian usually treated others. Although it wasn't an exact match—Kishiar was considerably more moderate—the essence was strikingly similar.

The subtle and capricious way of piercing through people.

During Katchian's reign as Emperor, everyone had been on edge, constantly wary of his unpredictable whims that determined who would be ousted and who would die. Yet, when filtered through Kishiar's hands, all that remained of this terror was mere clownery.

At the end of the sharp blades that the nobles once wielded to earn others' fears, there was really only such naivety.

Katchian probably wasn't oblivious to what Kishiar was showing him. The young Crown Prince couldn't hide his bewilderment and anxiety, as he realized that these people he'd regarded as simple and laughable were pushing him into unfamiliar territory. Despite attempts to mask it with a forced smile, his agitation was clear to those with keen eyes.

'Still... he's managing to hold it together.'

The moment their eyes met, Katchian seemed to visibly shrink, but soon gritted his teeth, regaining his posture. He then quickly excused himself, claiming that his unfinished sentence had merely been an expression of concern for the Emperor and Empress, and that his current physical condition was the only reason for his abrupt stop.

Although one could sense palpable rage when he looked at Kishiar, his external response wasn't bad.

"Ah, I see. Your Highness hasn't been well recently either. Yet you've come all this way to show concern for both of them, reminding us once again how precious family is," Kishiar responded, also feigning understanding and moving on. 'Family being precious,' what an ironic term between Katchian and them.

"...Indeed. Health is more important than anything else," the Emperor picked up, shifting his gaze toward Katchian. His eyes conveyed a lot of unspoken messages.

Regardless, the meal continued. From the moment Katchian mentioned health, Kishiar changed his conversational strategy. He ceased to shake things up and started to let Katchian lead the discourse.

It was done in such a sophisticated manner that even Katchian himself probably hadn't fully caught on.

Questions, then answers. More questions, then more answers.

From the topic of health, which Katchian had himself introduced, the natural flow of questions and answers was subtly geared to extract longer answers from Katchian's side while divulging almost no information from the Emperor's side. Katchian's guard was slightly tilted in a different direction, having already been rattled once.

Kishiar's skillful control of the conversation's pace was so masterful that Yuder even found himself contemplating whether his rhetorical skills had nearly reached a divine level.

'It's almost like he's testing the limits of how much Katchian can endure.'

Kishiar acted as if he had just discovered the human named Katchian for the first time. It was completely different from the way he had maintained an emotionless distance while feigning friendliness during their previous encounters within the imperial palace.

Sometimes like a clueless fool, and sometimes like a cunning politician who had swallowed a hundred snakes, he had endlessly dragged Katchian into a whirlpool of emotions by skillfully bringing the

Emperor and Empress into the conversation. A ceaseless stream of dialogue flowed, where each believed they were asking the other astute questions.

So engrossed in the conversation was Katchian that he only realized how much time had passed when he heard that dessert would be served shortly. He was slightly flustered.

‘Already?’

To calm his excitement, he took a deep breath. The dessert looked as beautiful as a painting, but he was not in the mood to eat.

‘Duke Peletta kept diverting the topic from the Emperor's health. The Emperor emptied his teacup three times, and I could smell herbs in two of those cups. He must have been medicated.’

It was unmistakable, even from close proximity, that the Emperor was unwell. The Empress couldn't hide her discomfort every time Katchian seemed to ask a question.

‘Why did they avoid discussing the Emperor's health but keep asking about mine? I said I'm still undergoing treatment to dodge any definitive statement about my recovery...’

The Crown Prince was well enough to resume official activities, but he was still receiving treatment, which the Emperor must surely be aware of. Yet the incessant questions about whether he was fully recovered made him uneasy, and he withdrew a step.

"Crown Prince."

Just when his head was spinning, the Emperor, seated before his dessert, called out to him with a gravely somber voice.

"The reason I wanted to hear about your health today is that I've been thinking of gradually delegating tasks that are difficult for me to handle myself."

Katchian blinked, taken aback by the unexpected statement.

"What do you mean?"

"There was a recent incident where a monster appeared in the Sun Palace. Fortunately, I was unharmed. However, it made me realize that it would be good to have someone to help out in trying times."

The Emperor continued.

"But now that we have confirmed that the Crown Prince's health is still not optimal, we are considering passing on these tasks to Duke Peletta."

For a moment, Katchian doubted his own ears.

"Pardon?"

"Not all tasks that one wants to undertake can be taken on; health is the primary condition. Duke Peletta meets the requirements to act on behalf of the Emperor and is in good health, so there should be no problem."

Only then did Katchian understand Emperor Keilusa's intentions.

'How cunning.'

The focus of today's dinner wasn't the Emperor's health; it was Katchian's. By constantly drawing attention to his state of health, and then turning the tables like this, they were about to stab him in the back.

They had forced Katchian to admit he was still not fully recovered and were now openly planning to give Duke Peletta official power.

'Could the aim of his recent strange activities have been leading to this?'

He had expected that as long as Emperor Keilusa was alive, he would never easily relinquish his position.

But their alternative was Kishiar La Orr.

Though many might scoff at his decision, Katchian didn't see it that way. He hesitantly spoke, casting an indifferent gaze at Duke Peletta, who seemed to always be grinning like a flower blissfully ignorant of impending calamities.

"Of course, such a decision should naturally have the agreement of others. As the Crown Prince of the Empire, I find it difficult to consent."

"Does this mean, despite your condition, you will undertake all the responsibilities I assign to you?" The Emperor retorted, his eyes unreadable behind his glasses. Katchian responded carefully.

"If entrusted, I will certainly do so. It is the duty of a Crown Prince, after all."

"Duty," the Emperor quietly repeated the word, then leaned back in his chair, muttering, "Very well, then..."

"The task I had intended to entrust to you involves a critical matter related to the palace's security. To begin with, the culprits behind the recent monster incursion have yet to be caught. I expect you to resolve this matter beyond any doubt."

Katchian's eyes widened momentarily. Whether he reacted or not, the Emperor continued.

"Feel free to mobilize anyone affiliated with the Sun Palace. Thoroughly investigate the palace guards who initially investigated the incident, the Cavalry, and other palace personnel. Show no mercy to anyone suspected. You've asserted this as your duty, so see it through."

Katchian was still unaware that the perpetrators of the monster invasion in the Sun Palace were his own healers, as Duke Diarca had yet to mention it to him.

Nevertheless, nobody in the Empire doubted that Diarca was behind it—Katchian La Orr included.

Suddenly, Katchian recalled that he had not informed Duke Diarca that he would be dining with the Emperor today. If he accepted this mission without first informing Diarca, would the Duke not become suspicious, especially since Katchian had already once attempted to free himself from Diarca's influence?

A coarse breath slipped through Katchian's lips, his gaze shifting towards Duke Peletta.

Kishiar remained silent, merely smiling brightly. Katchian caught sight of him whispering something to his dark-haired subordinate, and felt his head about to explode.

After Katchian had hastily left without uttering another word, Emperor Keilusa stared at the spot where the boy had been for a long time.

In the game of tactics, there is neither a perfect black move nor a perfect white one. It means there are no absolute enemies or allies; the more one obsesses over colors, the deeper they fall into the trap. Emperor Keilusa's brother, Kishiar, had skillfully exploited this concept, delivering a devastating blow to Katchian La Orr's mental state. This had been his entire scheme, written down and sent off that morning.

Although Katchian was still not of age, the Emperor felt it was precisely for this reason that he could not allow him to stay in his position any longer.

He had tried to frame Kishiar using the Apeto family and used that to break free from the Diarca family's influence. Although the attempt had failed and led him to spend the next few months in a state bordering on madness, he had never faced a court of law as a criminal.

It was because Diarca had ultimately sacrificed those who had worked under him, instead of the Crown Prince, for the crimes committed. When the trial was unfolding regarding the horrendous experiments

House of Apeto had conducted on the Awakeners above water, quick confessions came from those who were to die in place of the Crown Prince, under the water.

False confessions claiming that they had done everything, not the Crown Prince. Then, mysterious deaths in prison followed by swift closure of the case.

Thanks to Diarca's swift and silent maneuvering, the Crown Prince was officially absolved of the title of murderer. People only remembered the Crown Prince's failed assassination attempt and gossip from the House of Apeto.

But does escaping the blame for a crime make one innocent?

Could Katchian La Orr's attempt to make Kishiar a murderer be erased?

No. Crimes don't disappear. Everyone present knew that fact.

Even the Crown Prince knew this, hence he quietly accepted the protection from Diarca he had once tried to shake off. Regardless of his true feelings, he continued to maintain outwardly that he was innocent, merely recovering from a brief illness.

He never once apologized to Kishiar or to those who had been harmed because of him. Not a single official expression of regret had been made. He had merely fled into his palace, and until now, had done nothing but vent his anger.

And there he was, audaciously reading the shadow of death on the Emperor's face, an utterly covetous gaze.

This was proof of how lightly Katchian looked upon the Emperor and Kishiar. How could someone raised by Diarca's hand not belittle the Emperor?

Katchian, and indeed Diarca, were still letting their guard down.

Had they truly been vigilant, Katchian would not have come here today with Kiolle, without notifying Diarca. Had he given prior notice, Diarca would have neither sent Katchian to this gathering nor allowed Kiolle to accompany him.

Furthermore, the Emperor was extremely pleased today because he could confirm from Katchian's attitude towards Kiolle that, although he was in a position where he couldn't abandon Diarca, he was not fully yielding at heart.

Had the Crown Prince been content and arrogant under Diarca's care, it would have been difficult to find a way in. But if not, the story changes.

While conversing with Katchian, the Emperor reassessed what kind of person this young man was. He was still too young to perfectly mask his expressions and gaze amidst confusion, and sometimes such a gaze revealed more to an observer than a hundred words could.

Katchian's crimes were already heavy. Given the chance, he was someone who could commit more.

Perhaps that's why Kishiar had specifically summoned Katchian.

The eyes of the Emperor silently turned towards Kishiar.

In a brief silence, their similar gazes shared an understanding.

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"Now... it's truly time for the meal."

Just because Katchian had left the table first, it didn't mean that the imperial family's meal had come to an end.

Originally, the meal attended only by the imperial family and their close associates was divided into two parts. After finishing the first part of the meal with very small amounts of symbolic dishes among the



imperial family members, everyone would move to a slightly more intimate setting where the second part would continue.

And today's second part was much more relaxed than the first. The dishes that were served were designed more for taste and enjoyment than for formality or significance. The atmosphere was also more laid-back, adding to the overall experience.

Yuder was exchanging greetings with Countess Algorita Barnez, the chief maid to the Empress, in the venue where the second part was to be held. He remembered the meals from his past life.

Back then, casual greetings between companions during the second part of the meal were unthinkable. Even if someone had greeted him, Yuder would have only been on guard, never reciprocating. At the time, he had thought it was only natural, but now, the atmosphere felt more comfortable and genuine.

Next to Yuder sat Nathan Zuckerman, who had come along, while Kishiar sat across from him. For this occasion, even the chief attendant remained in front of the table, not as an attendant to the Emperor but in the capacity of a companion.

"The dish we had earlier was delicious, so they've served it again. Let's all try it."

"My word, this is truly delicious. I'm already looking forward to dessert."

"Zuckerman is as quiet as ever. How's the food to your liking?"

The conversation flowed easily, with no one sizing up or defending against each other. Meanwhile, a mountain of dishes, brought over by the others for Yuder, began to pile up in front of him.

'...Initially, it was just an order to transfer some distant dishes onto a smaller plate. When did it pile up like this?'

"Good, you're eating well. Here, have another."

Yuder threw a pointed glance at Kishiar, who discreetly slid another dish in front of him. No matter how he looked at it, half of the piled-up dishes were Kishiar's doing.

"..."

"What are you looking at me like that for?"

Their eyes met, and Kishiar responded with a brazen smile.

"Oh, that dessert I mentioned will be out soon. I assure you, you'll love it."

The 'dessert mentioned earlier' was precisely what Kishiar had whispered to Yuder, despite Katchian's occasional glances.

'He had told me to look forward to an entirely different dessert in the second part.'

Probably neither Katchian nor anyone else could have imagined that Kishiar would whisper such a thing secretly to Yuder.

Despite the plates already forming a tower, Kishiar nonchalantly slid new dishes into the gaps. The plates Yuder had silently consumed were piled to one side and taken away by the servants in a cyclical fashion. Compared to when he was dealing with Katchian, Kishiar's expression was incredibly soft and sweet.

Though Yuder was the one eating, for some reason, Kishiar looked as if he was the one enjoying delicious food.

The thought of telling him that he didn't need to go to such lengths vanished when their eyes met.

'...I don't get it. I guess I just eat what is given to me.'

Thankfully, he wasn't full yet.

That day, Yuder managed to finish not only the dishes presented by Kishiar but also those competitively offered by the Emperor and Empress. He successfully consumed numerous dishes and desserts.

When the five-tiered golden dessert tower—secretly ordered from the imperial chef by Kishiar, just for him—was finally presented before him, Yuder couldn't help but question the audacity of such a display in the presence of the Emperor. Regardless, it was all consumed in the end.

The Emperor and Empress seemed to have developed a rather misguided impression that Yuder had a special fondness for desserts.

"Kishiar, I heard you met with the legal scholars and high minister today. How did it go?"

Dinner was over. The Empress had already retired to her chambers, leaving Kishiar, Yuder, and their companions alone with the Emperor. Even without asking, it was clear that the Emperor was already fully aware of the day's events at the palace.

"Fortunately, the reception was not bad at all," Kishiar responded.

"Do you need any support from our end?"

Hearing the Emperor's succinct and unembellished question, Kishiar cracked a slight smile.

"Of course, your support would be beneficial, but not at this moment."

"I see. I assume you've brought me a detailed plan as well. Hand it over."

"Your Majesty's prescient words always leave me in awe."

"Enough with the flattery."

Chuckling lightly, Kishiar pulled a new sheet of paper from his robe. It contained matters almost identical to those he had discussed with the legal scholars. The Emperor quickly scanned through the document, pushed his glasses back up his nose, and looked up.

"You've outlined most of the essential points that must be included in the first set of laws. Simplicity and focus do carry weight."

"Indeed, Your Majesty."

"However, wouldn't discussing matters related to the second gender be too controversial at this point? To expedite the law's enactment, the priority of this section should be..."

As he spoke, the Emperor's eyes momentarily met Yuder's. He paused, his gaze lingering on Yuder's face for a few seconds before continuing.

"... Nevermind. Consider that comment unsaid. Proceed as you see fit."

"I appreciate your understanding," Kishiar replied, smiling.

"If there's a moment when my support is needed, do not hesitate to inform me."

"... Very well."

A long sigh escaped the Emperor's lips, which now seemed more lively than before. Whether the Emperor sighed or not, Kishiar smoothly transitioned to the next topic.

"Additionally, there is one more matter I would like to discuss, Your Majesty."

"What is it?"

"I plan to announce the recruitment for the second cohort of Cavalry and the establishment of new branches tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? That soon?"

"Everything that can be prepared here has already been completed."

Upon saying this, Kishiar slightly reined in the smile he had been holding.

"Also, contrary to our initial plans, I'd like to be more deeply involved in this project. There are areas where I feel I should personally intervene to ensure things go smoothly."

"Hmm... Do as you wish."

"Are you sure, Your Majesty?"

"Why hesitate? If you're concerned for me, there's no need."

Indeed, Kishiar was right. The Emperor looked resolute in his intention to support anything Kishiar aimed to accomplish. If Duke Peletta was away, the Emperor's burden would increase, but he now had time and health—luxuries he did not possess before.

There was a warm glow in the eyes of the Emperor, who readily entrusted everything to Kishiar.

"Understood. Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Speak to me before you leave the capital. I will send you an object imbued with my power. With it by your side, communication should be effortless," said the Emperor.

"Ah, about that. Your Majesty has quickly become proficient in using your newfound powers, but in my opinion, further training is essential for safer control and growth, is it not?" Kishiar inquired.

"That was your suggestion, yes. Have you found a way?"

"Yes, I have."

Kishiar, having responded concisely, widened his eyes and spoke, "The assistant beside me, not only is he among the best Awakeners in the Cavalry, but he is also more famously known within the group as our top trainer. Were you aware?"

"No, I was not aware of that particular detail."

The Emperor turned his head toward Yuder again, this time with a different gaze. "All the skilled individuals you see in the Cavalry are largely due to Yuder's training methods. He has assisted numerous colleagues who were lost, not knowing how to advance their abilities, and he has been exposed to more powers than anyone else."

The praise flowed like water.

"I can confidently say that there is no one in this world better than Yuder at understanding and nurturing an Awakener's abilities. While it's true that my assistant will soon leave the capital with me, one doesn't have to meet in person to assist with training plans."

Yuder caught a rare expression of surprise on the face of Nathan Zuckerman, who had been listening nearby. It was only natural. Although it seemed like a straightforward matter, upon reflection, it was an extraordinary statement.

Very few people in the world had the qualifications to instruct the Emperor. Those who did were treated very nobly. Even if Yuder's expertise was confined to the specialized field of Awakener powers, the notion that the Emperor could learn something from a commoner like him was virtually unthinkable.

Had Emperor Keilusa La Orr been a man of ordinary perceptions, he would have naturally sought Kishiar's help in this situation. However, without dwelling on a potentially offensive remark, the Emperor immediately nodded his approval.

"Very well."

The corners of the Emperor's lips faintly rose.

"So Baron Aile not only saved my life but will now also serve as my teacher. Could we have a private discussion about this before you leave?"

Yuder hadn't expected the Emperor to make a decision so swiftly. Though slightly surprised, he quickly composed himself and bowed his head.

"Yes, of course. But I dare not assume the title of 'Your Majesty's teacher.' Please, refer to me more casually."

Yuder's aim was to help the Emperor further develop and control his power for the sake of his safety; the rest didn't matter much. Being formally recognized as the Emperor's teacher would bring along burdens he'd rather not bear.

Though the Emperor's Awakener status was a secret for now, it would eventually come to light. Yuder had no wish to stir unnecessary commotion at that point.

What one does might remain the same, but how it is framed can change many things. Yuder subtly redirected his words to express this, but the Emperor, who likely understood his meaning, seemed to be more concerned with something else.

"The more I see, the more I regret. How did it come to this..."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind. It's settled."

The Emperor, swallowing whatever he was mumbling, sighed and spoke.

"While I am in a position where I cannot easily bend, I've learned that education is always the exception to all things. In the quest for knowledge, even an Emperor is nothing but a student. So, when teaching me, Baron Aile, consider nothing but the subject matter at hand."

It was a voice that could not be refuted, for reasons different than those with Kishiar.

And so, Yuder became the Emperor's unofficial tutor.

A day later, the entire empire was buzzing.

The news of the recruitment of new members for the Cavalry and the establishment of branches had everyone astounded, regardless of their social status, age, or gender.

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"We've disseminated announcements for recruitment in various regions, just like we did for the first Cavalry squad. It will take a bit more time for the news to reach the remote areas, but it shouldn't take too long."

The sun poured its light into the splendid Cavalry office.

Several people stood before Kishiar, who was seated with a bundle of papers in one hand, delivering their reports in succession.

The first to report was Nathan Zuckerman, an adjutant who had long been by Kishiar's side. He had hands-on experience conducting the first round of Cavalry recruitment, so he was now assisting with the second one as well.

Ideally, the recruitment should be handled solely by the Cavalry members. However, the group was still lacking in both manpower and experience. Even a novice mistake could prove fatal at this point. For the team to have the resilience to swiftly correct and forgive such errors, everyone needed more experience under their belts.



Therefore, Kishiar had planned for the second recruitment to be a joint operation between the Pelleta Knights and the Cavalry. Nathan Zuckerman and the others from the Pelleta Knights, having learned from the first recruitment, would help ensure that the Cavalry members could manage future recruitments on their own.

In fact, collaboration between the Pelleta Knights and the Cavalry could have been awkward, but there were no complaints from either side. Thanks to Kishiar, who was both the Duke of Pelleta and the Commander of the Cavalry, relations between the two groups were exceptionally good.

Members of the Pelleta Knights had frequently visited the Cavalry, and they had cooperated closely on various occasions, such as during harvest festivals and missions to the western regions. Moreover, the majority of both groups came from commoner backgrounds and held deep respect and loyalty for Kishiar as their lord.

As a result, a unique camaraderie had developed between the similarly-minded members of the Cavalry and the Pelleta Knights.

After Nathan Zuckerman had finished his report and stepped back, the next in line was Deputy Commander of Jung Division, Kanna Wand.

"Due to the flood of inquiries related to the second recruitment, the entire department that is temporarily in charge of this work is on the verge of being paralyzed. Starting today, we're assigning members from other Divisions who wish to officially join the administration section," Kanna Wand reported.

Until now, the members had spent most of their days in skill training and learning. However, the rigorous training had yielded results, and everyone now had a clear understanding of what they needed to train in for their personal growth. Illiteracy was a thing of the past.

Therefore, Kishiar had started to assign the well-taught and rapidly growing members according to their preferences and aptitudes. It was a more advanced classification than just dividing them into three categories based on their abilities: Sul, Shin, and Jung.

Those who were weak in combat but had a knack for administrative tasks took on those roles full-time. Those who were good with people were put in charge of guiding the people who were not members but working within the Cavalry.

While combat-capable members were undoubtedly important, solidifying the internal structure by picking those who were good at other tasks was paramount for the Cavalry's future growth.

Kishiar was already well aware of this need, and it was also something Yuder had desired after watching the Cavalry's progress for a long time.

Kishiar had consulted Yuder multiple times in anticipation of the Cavalry's structural reforms. The extensive personnel reshuffling and internal changes that had taken place were seamlessly executed, incorporating lessons Yuder had learned through trial and error in his previous life.

"Excellent. Keep me closely informed to ensure smooth progress."

"Yes."

Upon hearing Kishiar's praise, Kanna's eyes shone with strength. Despite assuming greater responsibilities than before, there was no hint of apprehension in her eyes. On the contrary, they burned with a desire and ambition to accomplish even more.

After the recent task allocation, Kanna and the other Deputy Commanders came to realize how much Kishiar had been shouldering alone: all these minor yet essential duties. They had never quite understood that meals, clothing, and even the maintenance of the Cavalry's facilities didn't magically take care of themselves.

The moment they recognized that their Commander had single-handedly managed everything until they were mature enough to share the burden was indescribable.

Next, Ever Beck stepped forward. With her characteristic calm demeanor, she quickly began her report.

"News has come in that nobles in the regions where we plan to establish Cavalry branches are showing resistance, as expected. However, their numbers are fewer than anticipated, so the first-phase deployment can proceed as planned."

Kishiar had already discussed receiving assistance from officials and was planning to send members to various locations to lay the groundwork for new branches. Their tasks included securing land and buildings in the proposed regions and screening initial applicants for the Cavalry.

While the first wave of deployed members were tackling unresolved issues, they would be sending updates back to the Cavalry's headquarters. Following that, a second wave, including Kishiar and other top-ranking officers, would be dispatched.

Kishiar had been open about these plans. While many still failed to grasp the real extent of Kishiar's capabilities and criticized him, there was a significant difference between now and the past. More people had started to seriously consider what it meant for Kishiar to act as the Commander of the cavalry, especially after being revealed as the new master of the divine sword.

Moreover, Crown Prince Katchian's recent assignment to investigate the monster that had invaded the Sun Palace on behalf of the Emperor also played a part in this.

Was it mere coincidence that the announcement of Crown Prince Katchian's assignment coincided with the Cavalry's second recruitment drive, both done in the Emperor's name?

It was a well-known fact that the relationship between the Crown Prince and the Emperor had not been cordial, to say the least. The sudden news that the Crown Prince had taken on this mission for the Emperor rattled many within the noble factions.

Even Duke Diarca's camp seemed unable to hide their confusion, failing to provide any substantial reaction. They had likely felt the shock of realizing that their assumptions were deeply mistaken.

But the shock the nobles felt didn't end there.

For the first time in years, the Emperor made a brief appearance in person at a meeting. Although he only stayed for a few minutes and left after a fit of agonizing coughs, it was enough to plunge people into chaos.

'Is the Emperor really on his deathbed? Has he given up even on receiving treatment and concealing his illness?'

'Could it be? Is the Cavalry's hurried second recruitment drive also related to this?'

The air was thick with questions and speculation.

Rumors were circulating that the Emperor had secretly made a deal with the Crown Prince regarding his future actions. The incident of a monster invading the Sun Palace was just the beginning...

'Could the Crown Prince, who once tried to break away from Diarca, not try it a second time? The fact that he shook hands with the Emperor as soon as he recovered suggests that—'

Naturally, the cough was an act, and the Emperor had anticipated this reaction.

However, neither Emperor Keilusa nor Kishiar actually thought that this event would have a significant impact on Duke Diarca and his loyal supporters. If the Crown Prince was in his right mind, he would soon offer an explanation, and the situation would be somehow resolved.

Still, the important thing was that the attack had succeeded, if only momentarily creating a small crack.

Prince Katchian was not, as people believed, an absolute pawn of the Diarca ducal house.

If people who had assumed that Duke Diarca's era would naturally follow the current Emperor's death suddenly realized that might not be the case, what would they feel? Merely teaching them that what they thought was a given is not actually so gave this event ample meaning.

‘...And when they recover from this shock, His Majesty will deliver another, allowing the second recruitment of the Cavalry and the establishment of the branch office to go smoothly.’

Yuder stood behind Kishiar, listening to reports from others and contemplating future events.

The second recruitment of the Cavalry and establishment of the branch office was certainly important. But it should not be the sole focus of everyone's attention. As Yuder saw it, the Emperor and Crown Prince affair was a bait Kishiar carefully crafted to allow the Cavalry to focus on consolidating their internal strength.

Those who had sharpened their blades to topple the Cavalry could not ignore this astonishing bait.

To use the Emperor of a nation as bait was an extraordinary move, yet neither the Emperor nor Kishiar seemed to mind. Considering the future status of the Cavalry, there could not be a more opportune time.

"Everything is going well so far... except for one thing. This variable called the 'Star of Nagran' is a little concerning."

Yuder recalled the rushed words of the intelligence agents.

They had brought back many useful items from the residence where the sage had stayed. Among them was the surprising information that Nahan had appeared in the capital in good health after disappearing from the west. The sage was currently by the Crown Prince's side, so they had not run into Nahan, but for how long that would last was uncertain.

The Eldore siblings and Gakane, who had directly heard Nahan's voice, all reported that Nahan and his associates seemed incredibly hostile towards the sage. It was not a surprising report.

“Even though many things have changed from my previous life, it seems the internal strife within the Star of Nagran continues.’

Nahan wouldn't usually attack other Awakeners. Yet, that wasn't an absolute, as Yuder, who had faced him before, knew all too well.

The sage and Nahan were both dangerous individuals. Yuder, who would soon leave the capital following Kishiar, did not want to leave any variables unresolved.

"Before the last family meal ended, I left a signal for Kiolle. If he's observant, he'll come looking soon."

Yuder had slipped a small note into Kiolle's pocket using the power of wind, right before Prince Katchian left and the previous family meal concluded.

To those uninformed, save for Kiolle, there would be no way of knowing who had sent the message or what it meant. However, if you were the person in question, you would know with certainty who sent it and what they intended to say.

'Even Kiolle, as foolish as he is, would understand that much.'

"And finally, my assistant mentioned that there was a particular matter he wished to propose today. Shall we hear it now?"

At that moment, Kishiar turned his head to speak, as if concluding that the final report from Steiber had ended. His slightly slanted eyes seemed to already know that Yuder had been lost in other thoughts.

Pushing aside thoughts of the Star of Nagran and Kiolle, Yuder opened his mouth.

"Ah, yes. Before we discuss establishing new branches and recruiting members, there's something I strongly believe we should address. I had mentioned it before today's meeting."

"And what would that be?"

"I propose we create a power control device specifically for the Awakeners within the Cavalry."

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"I propose we create a power control device specifically for the Awakeners within the Cavalry."

Yuder's unexpected statement led everyone else to look at him with undisguised curiosity.

"A power control device for the Awakeners? What's it for?"

Ever cautiously asked first. The name itself hinted at what the object might be, but she couldn't understand why Yuder was proposing its creation now.

Yuder glanced at Kishiar, who seemed to fully grasp his intentions, then at Nathan, who appeared unperturbed, and finally at the Deputy Commanders, who were filled with questions and concerns. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Knights capable of wielding Aura, as well as mages, each have their own devices to temporarily control their powers. However, there's nothing of the sort for the Awakener yet."

"Wouldn't it be better if such a thing didn't exist?"

Steiber questioned with a contemplative look.

"Do we really need a device to forcibly control our powers? Wouldn't that be like shackling ourselves?"

"It may seem that way, but—"

"Throughout history, knights and mages have created their own control devices. Even the now-obsolete divine power-limiting spells were crafted by Orhe, the Messenger of the Sun God. Why do you think they made such choices?"

Kishiar interjected smoothly before Yuder could complete his sentence. The Deputy Commanders collectively fell into deep thought. Kanna was the first to respond.

"Is it because if we're to coexist with those who don't possess powers, such a measure becomes necessary?"

Kishiar smiled.

"That's one reason, yes. But consider what we've experienced in the West, and you'll see there's another need."

"Ah... I see. It's a matter of being able to control our powers."

Ever answered with a slightly furrowed brow.

"Not everyone can control their abilities as well as we can. Some may go berserk; others may wish to lose their newly acquired powers. There's no guarantee that such individuals won't appear within the Cavalry in the future. Also—"

"Also?"

Kishiar urged Ever to continue.

"It would be necessary for individuals like those Awakeners from the Star of Nagran we captured in the West, wouldn't it?"

"Excellent."

Precisely. Yuder nodded toward Ever.



"That's right. It's not the only reason, but all of these are why I believe a power control device is necessary."

The Cavalry has jurisdiction over all issues related to the Awakeners. This meant that what happened with the Star of Nagran was just the beginning. They would have to continue addressing countless issues with Awakeners—helping them, and at times, passing judgment.

Currently, the absence of a means to control the Awakeners made handling them in urgent situations excessively cruel.

Initially, the regular non-Awakener knights who captured the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran had argued for piercing their clavicles and leg bones with chains to restrain them. They did so claiming that these individuals were too dangerous and uncontrollable.

It was only because the Cavalry objected and opted for round-the-clock surveillance that this harsh measure was avoided. But what if they hadn't established a temporary base in the West? Ever and Kanna had both witnessed this firsthand.

However, keeping a 24-hour watch on the Awakener wasn't ordinary even for the Cavalry. It had been feasible only because it was a special circumstance and involved only a few individuals. Going forward, they wouldn't be able to manage all offending Awakeners in the same manner. This was already the case with the Hosanna, and Gayle and Doyle brothers they were currently monitoring.

In places beyond the reach of the Cavalry, numerous Awakeners were still being judged uncontrollable without proper investigation. They were either killed or mutilated. Such practices continued until the invention of power control devices specifically for the Awakeners in Yuder's previous life.

Although the power control devices couldn't fully restrain the power of someone as strong as Yuder, they did serve as appropriate measures for those at risk of going berserk, those who simply wanted to live quietly, and those who had committed crimes but were not deserving of the death penalty.

After the invention of these devices, Yuder personally experienced how much could change depending on whether there were means of control. There were those who misused the control devices, of course, but that was the nature of all things in the world. Despite its drawbacks, some method of control was indeed necessary.

Ancient people who created control devices for knights, mages, and priests must have thought the same.

"Indeed... it's necessary for the Awakeners in places out of the Cavalry's reach. There are too many people in danger just for being Awakeners," Kanna muttered, nodding her head.

As she said, current Awakeners were threatened simply for manifesting their powers. It was even worse if their appearance significantly changed from that of an ordinary person. People feared what was different and uncontrollable, wishing to eliminate it.

Thanks to the limited effectiveness of the power control devices, Yuder, who had experienced 'all sorts of control methods,' knew these feelings very well.

"Hmm... I get your point. But do we have someone in the Cavalry capable of creating such a device?" Steiber looked worriedly at Kishiar.

"Let's first hear what the assistant thinks about it."

"Alright. Since it's a device for controlling power, researching existing control devices should be the first step. In fact, devices for mages are more abundant and frequently used, so it would be beneficial to seek the assistance of those knowledgeable about them."

"A control device for mages, and people who know about it. So, it all comes down to mages."

"Yes, fortunately, we have several mage allies staying with the Cavalry. Moreover... don't we currently have someone who is both a mage and an Awakener?"

"Ah..."

For a moment, the same name crossed everyone's mind. Thais Yulman, a mage engaged in research within the Cavalry, and Hellem, who had recently joined, were well-known to all present.

And Thais Yulman's apprentice, Alik Pelgin, had become an Awakener after joining the Cavalry. That was also a peculiar situation.

In his previous life, Emperor Katchian and some unknown mage had created the power control devices. But there was no reason to follow the same path in this life. Even if he didn't know who the original creator was, he knew what the devices were based on. He just had to create them, no matter the approach.

'Besides, it would be easier to maintain secrecy and minimize misuse if we develop it within our group,' Yuder thought.

"That makes sense. It seems like the most appropriate choice. Let's proceed that way," Kishiar concluded, smiling at Yuder.

"Since you brought it up, you're responsible. After the meeting, you'll accompany me to discuss it further. How does that sound?"

"I'll do that."

The expressions of the others remained unchanged upon hearing this. However, one person, Kanna, was different. Yuder saw her cast a nuanced, warm, yet awkward smile in his direction.

""Does she think Kishiar is playing tricks on me?"

The meeting ended shortly after, leaving the question unanswered. Yuder headed to the lab of Thais Yulman, where Alik was, with Kishiar in a strange mood.

"A control device for the Awakener... you want me to make it?"

Alik, who usually assisted his master Thais in his research, was startled once by Kishiar's appearance, and again when Kishiar indicated he wanted a private word.

And then he was so shocked by the ensuing proposal that he almost fell backward.

"You're a mage, so you must know the principles behind magic control devices."

"Well... yes?"

"I know you've been researching the power of the Awakener diligently with your master. Given that, who would be more suitable for this job than you?"

"But my expertise in creating magic devices is only basic. Wouldn't it be better to ask my master..."

"No, it has to be you."

Alik turned his head in surprise at Yuder's soft-spoken words.

"It is said that one can't understand mages without understanding magic power. Likewise, if one doesn't understand the power of the Awakener, one can't understand the Awakener themselves. The person who creates this control device must truly understand that it is not merely for restraint."

Alik's expression lost some of its shock and fear upon hearing this.

"I see... During my time researching this power with my master, I had considered the issue of control as well. While magic power can be regulated in multiple ways if it causes problems, the power of the Awakener has no such alternatives. It's extremely risky."

Since first becoming Awakener, Alik had been delighted that he seemed to be able to use elemental magic. However, as he continually studied and improved his initially feeble powers, he came to realize that this power was very different from magic.

An Awakener is just that—an Awakener, not a mage.

They may look similar on the surface, but they are not the same. The mysterious power of the Awakener could sometimes be uncontrollable, even by the person possessing it.

If Alik had encountered similar difficulties while learning magic, he could have easily controlled it using various means. However, when researching the power of the Awakener, he had to work twice as hard just to barely control it.

As Yuder had pointed out, no other mage understood the need and purpose of control as clearly as Alik did.

Though Alik Pelgin was a mage, he was also an Awakener. Only he could truly grasp his own identity, not his master.

After pondering deeply, Alik finally nodded his head heavily.

"Alright. I'll give it a try. This could benefit me as well."

"Good decision. Let me know if you need anything. But, by the way..."

With a graceful smile, Kishiar suddenly scrutinized Alik anew.

"It's not just that you've become Awakener—you've manifested the second gender?"

'Second gender? Alik?'

Yuder, who had never heard of this, turned his head to find Alik swallowing nervously, his face flushed.

"Ah! Can, can you see that? Is it because of the scent...?"

As Alik hastily fanned himself, as if trying to dissipate his sweat, Yuder also faintly sensed a fragrance.

"When did you reach this stage, Alik? Last time, you certainly hadn't..."

"It wasn't long ago. Around the time of the Cavalry party, I think... I considered reporting it to you separately, but I still can't believe that I've manifested as a second gender, so..."

Alik heavily confessed that he had manifested as an Omega. It now made sense why he had kept the fact of his manifestation a secret and didn't want to talk about it. Many male Awakeners often felt a great shock just by the fact that they could bear children if they manifested as a second gender Omega. Alik must have felt the same.

"But considering how recent your manifestation is, your scent is incredibly faint. Is there some sort of problem?"

"No, it's probably because of the medicine I developed with my master."

"Medicine? When did you start researching that? I've never heard of it."

Kishiar slightly furrowed his brow. Alik hurriedly clarified that the medicine was not dangerous at all.

"After I manifested my second gender, I found the transition a bit difficult, so my master created a medicine that suppresses the scent using improved magic herbs. Although my master is currently focusing on magic energy research, he used to be an authority on magic plants. So, anyway..."

The effects of the medicine that Alik had personally tested on himself turned out to be surprisingly good. Despite his recent manifestation, his scent was hardly noticeable, and his physical condition seemed as good as ever.

The slight scent that was emanating from him now was only because he had missed a dose that morning. According to Alik, if he maintained the original dosage and frequency, he would be no different from before his second gender manifestation. At Alik's words, Yuder felt considerable surprise and shock for the first time in a while.

'...He was able to create something like that?'

"Ah, of course, it's still in the process of improvement... but once I've tested it thoroughly and find it satisfactory, I was planning to report it to you. Really!"

Turning

Chapter 585

In the current times, it wasn't an exaggeration to say that individuals with second gender experiencing their heat period had no other option but to lock themselves away and rest after taking strong sedatives. The isolation and induced sleep not only reduced the amount of pheromones emitted but also shortened the duration of their heat period.

Though it might only reduce a week-long period to 3-4 days, there was no other viable alternative. The situation had been the same in Yuder's past life.

'No, it was even worse back then. With the increasing number of Awakeners, the number of beings with second gender also surged.'

Nowadays, unless you were part of special organizations like the Cavalry or the Star of Nagran, where Awakeners clustered, it was rare to even encounter one Awakener in a village. Even if someone exhibited traits of second gender, the chances of meeting an individual with an opposing second gender were quite low, reducing the likelihood of complications.

However, the number of Awakeners would only continue to increase, never decrease. Soon enough, even the average non-Awakener people would become aware of how beings with second genders experienced their heat periods and what pheromones were.

One of the things Yuder had hoped to change the most since returning to the past was exactly that issue. While Yuder had made strides in spreading a new understanding about Omega Awakeners, it was still far from sufficient.

In Yuder's view, the primary reason Omega individuals suffered so much in his past life was due to the overpowering scent they emitted during their heat period. This scent, even more potent than that of Alpha individuals, attracted the unsavory attention of non-Awakener powerbrokers.

Though the scent only affected other individuals with second genders, just the ability to perceive it led society to treat Omega individuals like undignified beasts. Rumors began to circulate that perverse, wealthy individuals were buying Omegas for their alleged enhancing or aphrodisiac properties, even though no evidence supported such claims.

Fixing a reputation is much more difficult than tarnishing one, especially in an era where people indulged in hedonistic pleasures without thought for tomorrow.

'It might have started around then. The number of highly skilled Omega individuals fit for the Cavalry began to decrease...'

In the early days of the Cavalry, Awakeners were still a new phenomenon, and the number of beings with second genders was extremely low. Omegas were not necessarily less skilled than Alphas. Discrimination based on second gender was virtually nonexistent.

However, as time passed and negative perceptions about Omegas increased, newly Awakeners manifesting as Omegas found their abilities to be notably weaker.

Back then, the origin of this trend was unknown. But now, watching the research of Thais Yulman and the Awakening of Emperor Keilusa, Yuder felt he was beginning to understand.

'If they were biased against Omega manifestation from the start, then their abilities would naturally not develop fully.'

In that context, the medicine Thais Yulman had created for his student who became an Omega was revolutionary. Yuder wasn't yet sure about the exact potency of the medicine, but if it could alleviate the suffering of individuals with second genders during their heat period, he was prepared to do whatever it took.

With determined eyes, Yuder looked over at Kishiar.



"...It's an incredible medicine. I never knew such a thing could exist. Wouldn't it be best to start supporting that first?"

Yuder was also hearing of the medicine's existence for the first time. Kishiar surely understood the significance.

"I'll do just that. I find it immensely intriguing myself."

They took Alik with them to the laboratory to meet Thais Yulman. The old mage readily accepted their request to produce and improve more of the medicine designed for Awakeners with second genders.

"Hmm, well, alright. I was already thinking of making some adjustments for my disciple anyway. If you'll also support it, then..."

"Yes. I'd like you to develop a method for mass production as quickly as possible."

"Mass production, you say... How many people do you expect to use it monthly?"

"At least a thousand people should be able to take it consistently each month. And it should also be easy to store."

"Heh. I've heard that even within the Cavalry, the number of Awakeners with second genders is quite limited. Is such a scale really necessary? I appreciate that you value this medicine, but if I have to produce it on such a large scale alone, my back might give out."

"If it were just for the Cavalry, there wouldn't be a need for that. However, I believe... that this medicine could become a valuable asset for both you and us in the future. Moreover, it could significantly help the world."

"Asset, you say? Are you planning to sell it?"

"Yes. You must be aware that the number of Awakeners is steadily increasing. Consequently, the number of Awakeners with second genders will also rise, and many who are struggling for the same reasons as your disciple will benefit from this medicine."

"I see your point."

"I propose that the Cavalry exclusively manufacture, sell, and distribute this medicine. In return, we'll share a portion of the revenue with you and your disciple. It may not seem profitable now, but I guarantee that within 10 years, you and your disciple will gain significant wealth and fame."

Thais Yulman, while much happier satisfying his own curiosity than benefiting humanity, cared deeply for his one and only disciple, Alik. Even if it seemed like he was exploiting Alik, the fact that the boy could produce such a miraculous medicine proved his worth. And conducting research always required funds. Like the Western Mage Union that faced difficulties due to a lack of research funding, many mages always sought wealthy patrons.

Thais Yulman, an Elder of the Pearl Tower and a man who lacked nothing, was no exception to this rule.

'More money is always good. Alik should also start making a name for himself, rather than just remaining under me. If they're going to handle all the annoying parts once the medicine is developed... There's no reason to refuse.'

Thais Yulman cheerfully accepted Kishiar's proposal.

"What percentage of the profits will you be sharing?"

"We'll determine that later, once we have fully assessed the medicine's efficacy and commercial value."

"That sounds fair. Understood."

"Then it's settled."

Kishiar lightly smiled and subtly turned his gaze toward Yuder. Yuder lifted the corner of his lips in satisfaction with the decision.

"Was there ever such a medicine in the previous game?"

Kishiar quietly asked Yuder on their way back from Thais Yulman's lab.

"No, there wasn't. If I had known that such a medicine could be created, I would have mentioned it earlier."

"How did you overcome the obstacle back then?"

"It wasn't much different from now. The best solution was to improve sleeping medicines and secure a space where they could rest while asleep."

During his time as a Commander, Yuder used various local branches as shelters to protect Omegas going through their heat periods. Anyone experiencing an impending heat period could visit a Cavalry branch, receive sleeping medicines, and use the isolation facilities.

"That's a good approach. I'll consider it once the establishment of the branches is complete."

"However, as the number of branches increases, management becomes more difficult and we reach limitations. It would be great if all the members at each branch followed orders from higher up, but that's often not the case. Particularly with Omegas, their scent becomes stronger during their heat, so prioritizing the supply of medicines would be advisable."

Kishiar chuckled softly. Yuder, puzzled by his laughter at what wasn't exactly a laughing matter, turned his head to find Kishiar caressing his cheek.

"Sometimes I've thought you were wiser than your years. But just now, you sounded like a seasoned manager who's worked for 20 years."

Yuder might not have 20 years of experience as a Cavalry Commander, but given the intensity and results of his work, it could well have been 30 years.

However, Yuder didn't respond, sensing a hint of bitterness in Kishiar's smile.

"I've noticed you've always been particularly concerned about Omegas among the Awakeners with second genders. Did you already know you'd manifest as Omega?"

"Yes."

"Have you had difficulties due to scents before? Or is there something related expected to happen?"

Despite his gentle tone, Kishiar's red eyes appeared sharp and cautious, missing nothing. Knowing what he might be suspecting, Yuder answered with as neutral a face as possible.

"Neither, in my case. I'm the only person with second gender who has never had issues due to scent or heat periods."

"Why? I mean, this time around your scent is noticeable, and although you haven't gone through a heat period yet, probably..."

His red gaze fixated on Yuder's face. Yuder knew what was left unsaid. These days, he could subtly sense Kishiar's scent drifting to him during everyday activities, an indication that his body was becoming more sensitive.

"I don't really know the reason. What I do know is that I've seen many people with second genders struggle with related issues, but they've never affected me."

This wasn't the case in his previous life. But this time would be different.

Where did that difference stem from?

Upon deep thought, one point stood out.

'In my previous life, Kishiar died after I experienced a series of strange, connected phenomena. Now, he hasn't died.'

Kishiar remained silent for a while, deep in thought. Sensing his eyes darkening somewhat, Yuder decided to change the subject.

"By the way, Commander."

"Yes."

"How do you plan to mass-produce the medicines?"

"Well... usually, the merchant guilds specialize in this. I'm thinking of contracting with the Shuden Trading Company for production and distribution."

Kishiar answered quickly, as if he had thought it all through beforehand.

"If it's just within the Empire, centralizing it around the Cavalry would suffice. But if it's a product that needs to be spread globally, we'll need the company's influence. Shuden might not be very large, but they are trustworthy, so there shouldn't be any issues there."

"Indeed, that must be the case."

Judging by the way he spoke, Kishiar seemed to have had considerable experience with matters like this since his days as the Duke of Peletta. The fact that he had never shown any signs of financial strain, despite having only the barren land of Peletta as his territory, suggested that his success wasn't solely due to his imperial lineage.

'I seem to recall Mick Shuden had connections with Kishiar since he established the trading company in Peletta... Perhaps Kishiar has been amassing wealth this way since then.'

It was not uncommon for nobles to keep trading companies under their sway. The now-imprisoned Duke Tain, for instance, had exploited the trading companies in the west to fill his own coffers.

Even though Kishiar had become the Duke of Peletta at a rather young age, it seemed likely that he could have pulled off something like that.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Oh, no reason. I was just thinking that I hope this venture goes well."

"Don't worry, it will."

Kishiar smiled faintly.

"If it's something you wish for, it will undoubtedly come to pass."

Turning

Chapter 586

Within the vast territory that nearly encompassed half of the 7th Wall District of the capital, lay the Imperial Knights' compound.

Cautiously scanning his surroundings, Kiolle Diarca descended from the carriage that had entered the compound. Though his position had shifted to that of the Crown Prince's escort knight, his fundamental affiliation was still with the Imperial Knights. Despite having no need to act so cautiously, his shoulders remained tense, filled with an uneasy energy.

"Ah? Is that you, Sir Diarca?"

"Wha—!"

Suddenly, someone called out to Kiolle from behind. For a brief moment, he tensed up as if he had been struck by lightning. Quickly composing himself, he creakingly turned his head towards the source of the voice.

Two members of the Imperial Knights, whose names he couldn't even recall, offered him a casual salute.

"Indeed, it is you, Sir Diarca. What brings you here?"

"You haven't been here in a while. If you have any business, would you like us to assist you?"

Their faces were filled with warm smiles. However, Kiolle's expression had long since turned sour, as if crumpled paper.

"...Are you implying that I have no reason to be here unless I have some business?"

"Huh?"

The knights who had initiated the conversation blinked in surprise at his irritable reaction.

"No, no, not at all. We were just happy to see you after such a long time!"

"Yes, exactly. We can assist you with your duties and perhaps catch up a little—"

"Do I look like someone who can't handle my own affairs without help? Also, this isn't a place where common knights should be idly wandering during duty hours. Who said you could be so blatantly lazy here?"

"..."

Of course, that was the official protocol. But how many in the Imperial Knights actually followed it? Especially coming from Kiolle Diarca, who barely managed to enlist thanks to his family name and was rumored to be inferior even to the lowest-ranked knights in skill!

"Associating with lazy people like you is an insult to me. I have no conversation to share with people whose names I don't even remember. Leave."

Truth be told, the knights had approached Kiolle not out of genuine kindness but because they thought it amusing to engage with the scorned youngest son of the Diarca Ducal House. They felt chills run down their spines, as if he had read their minds.

"So Diarca is still Diarca, huh..."

"I've heard rumors that a lot of people have underestimated him lately. Seems they were true."

They reluctantly retreated, unable to utter another word.

Left alone, Kiolle didn't let down his guard until they had completely disappeared. Then he finally relaxed his tense back and gritted his teeth.

"...That damn Cavalry bastard... Not only can I not crawl up to him, but he dares to summon me here?!"

The reason for his visit was a hastily-written note he had received secretly during the imperial family meal. Scrawled in it were a few numbers and a word. After some thought, Kiolle had deduced that these indicated a date, time, and the name of the Imperial Knights' training ground. This particular training ground was shared by both the Cavalry and the Imperial Knights. It was also the place where Yuder had previously given the Imperial Knights a sound thrashing. As soon as he had realized this, the sender's identity and intentions became crystal clear in his mind.

Since the Cavalry was located within the grounds of the Imperial Knights, visiting under the pretext of some task was simple. The Crown Prince would naturally not suspect him. However, the fact that he had to comply with Yuder's instructions, even while aware of all this, was irksome.



'Damn it! What was up with those guys just now? I thought I had been found out, scared me for a second.'

The knights had been more irritable than usual when they spoke, making him anxious that his motives might be revealed. What he didn't realize, however, was that the knights had read their own base intentions in his irritation, thinking he was appropriately expressing aristocratic disdain.

Thus, the reputation of Kiolle Diarca rose once more that day.

"You're here."

"That's all you have to say after calling me all the way here?"

What else was he supposed to say? Yuder silently observed Kiolle, who stood awkwardly in a corner of the empty training ground. Precisely three seconds after their eyes met, the air seemed to deflate from Kiolle's puffed-up liver, and his previous fears returned.

Avoiding Yuder's scrutinizing gaze, Kiolle turned his head and spoke.

"... I said to His Highness the Crown Prince that I had some business to attend to at the Imperial Knights. I don't think he'd suspect me, but just in case, I'll return as soon as possible."

"Hmm, alright. No need to drag this out."

Yuder extended his hand towards Kishiar, unambiguously.

"Hand it over."

"What, what are you talking about?"

"The information we agreed to exchange. Naturally, you should be the one to go first, since you're likely to have less valuable information."

While Kiolle couldn't argue with the logic, being demanded like that made him feel as though he had been reduced to a pet. He clenched his teeth, but he couldn't help but speak first.

"I've been keeping a close eye on those charlatans. I don't know if you're already aware, but after the last party where we met, they've mostly been in the Bright Palace, making it easier to watch them."

Yuder nodded; he already knew that the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, including the sage, had been staying at the Bright Palace for a long time. Kiolle continued.

"What I've noticed is that there's absolutely no chance that they are benevolent healers. They hardly ever leave their lodgings, except when they come out to treat the Crown Prince. But whenever they did show up, I followed them to see what they were up to. I even followed them into filthy restrooms, you know?"

Yuder sighed as he looked at Kiolle's innocently blinking eyes.

'I did say it might be better to directly ask, but I never suggested following them into bathrooms...'

"Alright, just tell me what you found. If I deem it useless, I will only share equally useless information in return."

"You sly... even if it's useful, you could just say it's not!"

"Why would I do that? If you bring valuable information, it's in my interest to reciprocate, so that our relationship continues to be mutually beneficial."

"..."

"It's common sense if you have a brain, don't you think?"

"Are you saying I don't have a brain?!"

Having met Yuder several times now, Kiolle seemed to have developed a knack for understanding even his subtle insults. His fists clenched in irritation, but he had no choice but to start recounting what he had observed.

"... Listen, the reasons I suspect they're charlatans are as follows."

Since meeting Yuder, Kiolle had resolved to tail the so-called healers wherever they went.

He endured even the most distasteful activities just to understand their actions. He questioned them, observed them eating, and even followed them when they left their lodging for walks. Eventually, they became so wary of Kiolle that just the sound of his footsteps was enough to make them visibly uncomfortable.

However, the middle-aged man who seemed to be their leader was an exception.

Unlike the young healers who couldn't hide their discomfort and fear around Kiolle, this man had no fear. He always spoke with an overly polite tone that was almost irritating, bowing his head and adding, as if cursing, that if anyone wanted treatment, they should come to him. The way he spoke made him sound as insufferable as a pompous priest.

But this man was also the one whom Crown Prince Katchian trusted and kept by his side the most. Therefore, Kiolle decided to witness firsthand the moment these men had a direct meeting with the Crown Prince.

At this point, Yuder's eyes sparkled with intrigue.

"So you finally saw it?"

"Yes."

After meeting Yuder, Kiolle had worked hard to gather information about these people. In order to win the Crown Prince's favor, he bowed his head more deeply than before. Perhaps because the Crown Prince had started to trust him more after the Cavalry party incident, Kiolle had finally gained the honor of attending the Crown Prince's treatment sessions.

Kiolle then described what he had seen with a serious expression.

"The treatment was as simple as I've heard. The aged leader would sit beside His Highness, who was lying on the bed, take his hand, and engage in what seemed like an endless conversation. The others sat quietly, burning incense and herbs... Occasionally, they would summon servants to refill the Crown Prince's tea. That was it."

Truthfully, it was so dull that Kiolle had almost dozed off halfway through. But he could swear that this really was the extent of it.

"It was as if they were merely discussing health and emotions, no magical aura or anything. How could this even be considered treatment? They are charlatans, pure and simple. Do you really believe they are Awakeners? Hard to believe based on this alone."

"..."

Afterwards, Kiolle subtly suggested to the Crown Prince that these healers seemed to be getting a lot of respect for doing nothing. As a result, Kiolle was ordered to wait outside during future treatment sessions.

'This guy... He's treated as lesser than even the sage.'

If it weren't for Kiolle being Diarca, Crown Prince Katchian would've probably driven him away without a word. Yuder sighed and clicked his tongue inaudibly.

The absurd and laughable part was, Kiolle still believed that the Crown Prince was gaining more trust in him day by day.

"His Highness shares tea and strategic games with me every other day now. And I was the only one permitted to accompany him during meals recently. He trusts me," Kiolle said.

"Uh-huh... Sure."

Yuder suspected that it was more likely for Katchian to engage with someone he considered easy to handle than with someone he genuinely trusted. He guessed that either the Crown Prince had realized Kiolle was less clever than he appeared, or Kiolle had inadvertently revealed a vulnerability he himself was unaware of. It was a remarkably accurate conjecture.

"Ah, but aside from the aged leader who primarily performs the treatments, the younger ones do seem to be true Awakeners."

Ever since their arrival, the number of rats in the Bright Palace had increased, and rumors about ghosts had started circulating. Kiolle had even heard soldiers, who were on night duty, say that they couldn't move forward on paths they knew well, as if a wall had suddenly appeared.

In the past, he hadn't believed it, but after hearing from Yuder that they were Awakeners, he couldn't just dismiss it lightly. He volunteered for several night shifts. Other soldiers and knights were shocked, but he insisted. As a result, he discovered that the rumors were, to some extent, true.

"It was dawn. I was going to the bathroom when I found four rats gathered in a circle, their tails intertwined as they spun around."

"And then?"

"I drew my sword and shouted, and they vanished."

The next day, Kiolle hounded the healers, interrogating them if they knew anything about the incident. Complaints about filthy rats appearing because of those unfortunate newcomers were just a bonus. The healers dispersed, avoiding Kiolle's gaze without uttering a word.

After that, all the tales of rat sightings around Bright Palace ceased entirely. So did the soldiers' eerie stories. People guessed that Kiolle must have been dreaming, but Kiolle believed it was no mere coincidence.

"And you know... this is a bit of a different topic, but I think it's certain that my father was unaware of their true nature."

"Why do you think that?"

"After they visited our home, Father asked a lot of questions about them. In my opinion—"

"Hold on."

Yuder raised his hand to interrupt him.

"Did the healers meet your father? The Duke of Diarca?"

"Yes."

"When did they go to see him? For what reason?"

"Well, it was not too long ago. I think Father wanted to hear directly from the healers about the Crown Prince's treatment. Is that important?"

"..."

'Of course it's important. What could be more important?'

The Duke of Diarca, who had only dealt with the healers indirectly up until now, had for the first time personally met them. How could such an event not be significant? Yuder clenched his fist for a moment before loosening it again.

"Tell me again. Properly. The exact timing and everything you saw that day."

Turning

Chapter 587

"Repeat it. Tell me again, this time in exact detail, about what you saw that day."

Kiolle had insisted that the information he'd gathered painstakingly over time, observing the healers, was far more important. However, his claims fell on deaf ears in the face of Yuder's judgement, who deemed other information more valuable.

Frustrated, Kiolle had no choice but to recount the events of the day Yuder was interested in.

"A while ago, right after that incident at the Sun Palace, I heard that they would be coming to our house. My father didn't tell me about it, so I only found out through rumors. Not that it matters; it wasn't anything I needed to know. Still, I had to keep an eye on them, didn't I? So, I decided to take charge and bring them myself."

Given that they were staying at the Crown Prince's palace, and Kiolle was working there as well, guiding them was simple enough.

Kiolle escorted a middle-aged man, who was the leader of the healers, along with one nervous young apprentice, to the Diarca estate. Even among the crowded mansions in the Third Wall District, the Diarca residence was renowned for its elegance. The young healer seemed to shrink in its presence, his shoulders hunched and his spirit subdued.

But the middle-aged leader was a different story. He walked with head held high, following Kiolle. His demeanor remained unchanged, even in front of Duke Diarca, as if harboring some secret scheme.

He greeted the Duke and his attending nobles with a respectful yet unobsequious attitude.

"Hello, my name is Ajihen Toom."

Ah, yes, that was his name. Kiolle vaguely remembered that the man had introduced himself with that name before the Crown Prince some time ago.

"Ajihen Toom? Doesn't that mean 'wise one' in ancient language? Not your real name then. How pretentious to call yourself wise."

A noble beside the Duke sneered. Behind their fans, cold laughter emanated as they looked down upon the healers. The young healer appeared to be so frightened that he was almost prostrating himself.

"Indeed, it's not my birth name. But if a name is never called or bears no significance, can it truly be considered mine?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I have no family. But I do have comrades who are like family to me. Therefore, the name they call me is my name. You summoned me here to see me as I am with my comrades; hence my name is indeed Ajihen Toom."

"Smooth talker, aren't you?"

Duke Diarca, sitting in the highest seat, murmured with narrowed eyes.

"Fine, call yourself whatever you wish. What matters is the explanation for your recent actions. If you want to be called wise, then so be it."

"Thank you."

"But your words alone won't convince me. Show me this wisdom you're so proud of."

No matter his age, Duke Diarca remained formidable. His natural malice, his oppressive aura, and his cold gaze that reduced everyone to mere objects had an instant, crushing effect on all.



Even the audacious middle-aged man who'd asked to be called wise wasn't entirely immune. Kiolle, standing at a safe distance behind the healers, noticed beads of sweat forming on the back of the man's neck, despite his seemingly serene face.

The moment he said that, the man started to feel even more like a joke and a scammer.

Of course. In this world, there could be no other madman who wouldn't be scared when facing his father except for Yuder Aile. That man was a calamity all by himself. Even if those healers were true Awakeners, they couldn't be more impressive than someone who single-handedly spewed flames reaching the sky and decapitated a monster the size of a house.

"Understood. However, before I proceed with my story, I would like you to first pay attention to the colleague I have brought with me."

As the sage extended his hand, the young man hunched behind him flinched and raised his head. He was a young man with a complexion resembling the southern people, his skin a deep red, and a distinct scar tearing through one of his ears.

"His name is Diemon. For you to fully believe what I am about to tell you, his assistance is absolutely necessary."

"So, he's going to perform some tricks?"

Another noble jeered lightly. The sage remained unflappable. Duke Diarca waved his hand in annoyance, granting permission.

"Fine. Kiolle, you may leave."

Duke Diarca decided not to let Kiolle hear the conversation he was about to have with the healers. Yet Kiolle didn't seem to mind as he retreated immediately, heading to his room.

He heard the healers spoke for several hours in front of his father and the other nobles. Surprisingly, they returned to the palace without being thrown out.

"I don't know what they discussed that day. During dinner, the only thing my father asked me was about the likelihood of me becoming a Swordmaster if I diligently practiced swordsmanship, and how competent Theorado, the current Commander of the Imperial Knights, was. But it's true that my father has since been curious about those men."

At this point, Yuder's expression changed.

However, Kiolle continued, blissfully unaware.

Whenever Duke Diarca encountered Kiolle afterward, he would subtly ask about the healers—what they were like in the palace, how close they were to the Crown Prince.

"I obviously told him that I hardly saw them outside of being near the Crown Prince. If my father had known about them from the start, would he bother to ask me such questions? Clearly, even he's been deceived by those men!"

'So after all this astonishing revelation, that's your conclusion?'

Yuder looked at Kiolle, whose naivete was overwhelming, and realized anew how his obliviousness was a double-edged sword.

'What a close call that I heard this information in detail today.'

Even if the sage had genuinely met Duke Diarca without any incident, this information was critical. Moreover, this meeting happened after the event at the Sun Palace and was the first direct conversation between Duke Diarca and the sage.

And not everyone was there. If Kiolle was to be believed, only the sage and the false sage from his previous life were present.

'How could this not be important?'

Although Kiolle was horribly inarticulate and lacked observational skills or talent, he was still the son of Duke Diarca. Everything he nonchalantly observed and heard was inaccessible yet crucial information from the outside.

A chill ran down his spine, and his head spun. Yuder dredged up all the information he had gathered so far and added Kiolle's story to it.

The conclusion he reached after some time was simple.

'It's certain that those men infiltrated the Sun Palace.'

Moreover, the aggressive and cruel tactics of summoning monsters and controlling animals and humans were not necessarily the will of Duke Diarca. It seemed as though the individuals involved had chosen this course of action themselves.

Kishiar had already suspected that the events were not typical of Duke Diarca's modus operandi. If Duke Diarca had summoned the sage immediately afterward, looking perturbed, then it would have been safe to assume it was indeed his doing.

'Duke Diarca prefers to manipulate from behind the scenes rather than spill blood openly. He must have wanted to use many spies, not just the sage... yet, the only direct attack we received that day came from the sage's side.'

There was only one implication. The only effective means Duke Diarca had utilized to gather information within the Sun Palace that day had been the Sage and other Awakeners.

Even though they had ultimately failed to breach the last line of defense, formed by Nathan, Kanna, and Gakane, they had still gotten through. The Sage must have known this too.

'No, could it be that they intentionally chose such a conspicuous method?'

The sage had managed to persuade Duke Diarca that day. To do so, he would have naturally offered something of significant value to the Duke.

Yuder pondered what he would have offered in the sage's position.

'Ability to penetrate numerous defensive lines and secure the imperial palace with just a few individuals. Also, they returned the favor of monsters with monsters, earning both public fear and acclaim. Plus, they might have offered information that Duke Diarca wasn't aware of until then.'

The current Duke Diarca was extremely cautious and didn't prefer direct methods. Other Dukes who opposed him politically had often criticized his approach as cowardly.

However, after the Cavalry gained significant praise for monster subjugation in the west, his recent blatant intrusion using a monster into the Sun Palace earned him unprecedented reviews. Duke Diarca who must have been irritated by the way things had happened in a much more drastic way than he expected, would surely not be ignorant of that fact.

And then, the most crucial piece of information—information.

Yuder suspected that the one who offered this 'help' was none other than the fake sage from his previous life, Diemon. Although he couldn't confirm what exactly Diemon had done there, as Kiolle hadn't seen it himself, that didn't mean he couldn't make educated guesses.

Kiolle had clearly told him that after the conversation, Duke Diarca had inquired about the 'Swordmaster.'

'Swordmaster. Why would that term suddenly come up in that context?'

That day, the only one who had directly killed the invading monster was Nathan Zuckerman.

Nathan Zuckerman was a hidden Swordmaster. To kill the monster, he had to release a master-level aura.

Kanna and Gakane were the only witnesses, but there was one more entity that knew—the monster that had been slain.

What if that monster was not merely controlled just to be there at that moment? What if, like Emperor Keilusa, who could see and hear through objects, someone had been monitoring through that monster?

And what if the fake sage Diemon was involved in this?

Perhaps Duke Diarca had learned of the presence of an unfamiliar Swordmaster in the Sun Palace that day. Considering he likely knew about the new sword mark on the Emperor's Sword Mark, would it be so difficult for him to connect the dots?

‘...It's nothing less than information about the new Swordmaster, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been hiding his identity all this time. If he had information on him, then surely he can endure some other issues.’

Was this speculation too far-fetched? Yuder had a feeling it probably wasn't.

Oblivious, Kiolle kept grumbling at him for more information. Yuder looked at Kiolle's face and spoke.

"Kiolle."

"When the hell are you going to stop calling me like that?"

"Keep an eye on your father from now on."

"What are you talking about?! Are you telling me to be hostile towards my dad?"

Caught off guard, Kiolle became furious. Yuder ignored his reaction and continued speaking.

"From what we've found out, the individual who calls himself a sage specializes in mind manipulation, most likely psychic abilities."

"Mind control? Psychic abilities? Are you saying that guy is manipulating my father?"

"We can't be sure yet. We don't fully understand how he uses his abilities, and given that he's met with Duke Diarca, anything could happen in the future. Just keep an eye on whether Duke Diarca starts behaving differently."

"What, what, what?"

"And you should also be cautious from now on. Don't get too close to them and avoid extended conversations. If I notice even the slightest change in you the next time we meet, I'll put you to sleep for the rest of your life. Just so you know."

"What...?"

This was not just information sharing; it was practically a bombardment. Yuder walked past Kiolle, who stood with wide eyes and an open mouth. Just as Yuder was almost out of the training ground, Kiolle seemed to snap back to reality and shouted after him.

"What the hell are you talking about?! Come back and explain! Are you ignoring me? If you take one more step, you won't get away with it...!"

'I'll have a lot to report when I get back,' Yuder thought.

Turning

Chapter 588

"According to the information that the assistant has brought, the identity of the intruders in the Sun Palace is as we suspected—the Star of Nagran," Kishiar summarized with a calm face.

"Yes."

"It must have been easy for Duke Diarca to make a secret deal with them behind the Crown Prince's back. The issue was that they were more conspicuous than expected. However, we gained both in evaluation and information, so there's no need to be angry."

"Yes. The sage appears to have already won a good deal of trust from the Crown Prince through healing, and if he can earn the trust of Duke Diarca through this incident, he will have had good reason to take the risk."

"He must have known that this would deepen the internal strife within the Star of Nagran, yet he proceeded. He must have something he strongly desires. Most likely power, but... We need to watch for signs of brainwashing among those around him, starting with Duke Diarca."

It was Kishiar, of course. He had perfectly deduced the entire situation from the few words Yuder had provided.

"I think so, too."

"As for the brainwashing, it seems that it has already begun to some extent, according to the information Kanna brought."

Kanna had been reading useful information in collaboration with intelligence agents who had collected potential evidence from the house where the Star of Nagran people had stayed. It seemed like Kanna had discovered something and reported it to Kishiar before Yuder.

"What was the information?"

"The owner of the leather strap that Gakane brought has been confirmed. It is a man named Baron Renbow, who has taken the place of Baron Durmand."

"So that means..."

"Yes. He's the liaison between the Star of Nagran and Duke Diarca. He seems to have a decent relationship with the Crown Prince as well. According to the information read from the strap, he has been more than willing to help them out."

It's unlikely he'd suddenly become so benevolent. If he was a nobleman loyal to Duke Diarca, the odds were high.

But if the sage had influenced him to act this way, then it was a different story.

'I need to dig deeper into these people.'

If Kanna had already found that much, she might have also discovered the capabilities of other men near the sage. Yuder opened his mouth as he turned over these thoughts.

"So, it seems that he has learned about Sir Zuckerman's skills. What are your thoughts on that?"

"You mean the information that Nathan is a Swordmaster."

Kishiar's expression remained impassive. There was no sign of surprise or anxiety, even though a long-hidden talent of one of his subordinates had been revealed.

"Well, whether or not he believes the information is a separate matter. After hearing the questions he posed to Kiolle about Theo and Swordmaster following that information, along with the news of the Emperor's health, he'll likely be distracted for a while. It's actually a good turn of events."

Yuder had also anticipated that Duke Diarca would not fully trust the information given by the sage, but Kishiar's confidence seemed even deeper.

'But, Theo?'

"By Theo, are you referring to Theorado Van Tain, the Commander of the Imperial Knights?"



Yuder recalled a past incident when they had quarreled over the use of the training ground. At that time, Kishiar had directed him to Theorado for permission, suggesting they were acquainted.

'He called him Theo back then too. Are they actually close?'

"We weren't particularly close. In our younger years, we briefly trained under the same master—His Majesty, who was the first prince at the time, and myself, in the art of the sword. That's the extent of our relationship."

Kishiar responded smoothly, as if he had read Yuder's thoughts. Yuder stared at him silently for a moment, prompting Kishiar to glance back and ask,

"You seemed curious. Was I mistaken?"

"What does Commander Theorado Van Tain, have to do with a Swordmaster?"

Yuder deflected the question rather than answering it. Kishiar suppressed a light chuckle before responding.

"Well, you probably know to some extent because of your work in the West, but Theo has little interest in anything other than the sword, due to his strong lineage from Tain Duchy. Many believed that if a new Swordmaster were to appear in the Empire, it would be him."

That's why there had been so much speculation that the recent "New mark on the Emperor's Sword Mark" left by Kishiar might actually have been the work of Theorado Van Tain. Despite his denial, the suspicions persisted.

"Perhaps Duke Diarca hasn't let go of that idea yet. Upon hearing that Nathan is a Swordmaster, the first person he inquired about was Theo. He probably suspects that the information was intentionally altered to hide the fact that it was actually Theo, not Nathan, there."

'Indeed, if someone hears that an adjutant who had been quietly serving Duke Peletta for decades suddenly has the skills of a Swordmaster, they would naturally suspect the information is altered.'

However, it was absurd to think that the next person Duke Diarca asked about was Kiolle's likelihood of being a Swordmaster. That question alone was an insult to all Swordmasters in the world.

"Anyway, we have a good understanding of Duke Diarca's current mindset, so there should be no issues in dealing with him moving forward. Good work."

Normally, Yuder would have left to attend to the next matter at hand, but today was different. He had additional information he wanted to share with the one man who knew his secret.

"Commander, there's one more piece of information I'd like to share."

"Judging by your expression, it's not something Kiolle provided. Is it related to the 'previous game'?"

"Yes."

Yuder looked down at the tactical board that had been neatly placed on the corner of Kishiar's desk. Since that day, the board had never left Kishiar's workspace.

As he traced the lines drawn on the board with his eyes, Yuder slowly began to speak.

"This is not the first time I've heard the name the Star of Nagran."

"You seemed to know little about them. The situation must have been quite different before?"

"Different, yet similar."

In his previous life, the Star of Nagran had also split from within and perished in internal strife. However, back then, Yuder had only learned about them after everything had already ended.

Yuder briefly described the events of that time.

"There was a dangerous group gathering Awakeners to attack the nobles and royals of various countries. They had the same name as now, but back then they fell apart due to internal strife before they could execute their plans."

Their base near the southern desert had been completely devastated, and they had since vanished entirely.

"A few years later, another group appeared with the same name."

Yuder recounted the story of the false sage who had enchanted many but ultimately met his end at Yuder's hands.

"I had information linking that false sage to the previously disappeared Star of Nagran. And indeed, I saw him among those who recently arrived in the capital alongside the sage."

"Internal strife, ruin, and now a second sage."

Kishiar's fingers tapped slowly on the armrest of his chair.

"Among them, it seems the internal strife is proceeding similarly to before, leaving the rest of the seeds yet to blossom."

"Yes. Many circumstances have changed, but their internal discord remains the same."

"That's inevitable. If the current sage was moving with similar intentions as before, then someone like Nahan who despises the nobility and the non-Awakeners would have judged that they can't walk the same path."

Indeed, the internal strife was already happening in the capital. It was not far-fetched to think that the same events as before would occur again.

"Before such events repeat themselves, I wish to stop everything."

Both the current sage and the internal strife were of course individuals that the Cavalry must be cautious of. However, the person who concerned Yuder the most at this moment was the fake sage, Diemon, who had ruined many things like an unseen storm in his previous life.

Upon hearing that, Kishiar paused his tapping on the armrest.

"Initially, I had thought of letting the sage's actions be, assuming they would contribute to the chaos in Diarca. But if the entity my assistant is guarding against becomes an even greater threat later, then we must also change our strategy."

"What do you suggest?"

"Although the sage and Nahan appear to have different goals, I believe their underlying purpose is the same. They both aim to serve the group of Awakeners called the Star of Nagran."

That was true. Both the sage and Nahan acted with the goal of serving the Star of Nagran in mind. This was a fact that could be easily ascertained from the words of the Awakeners affiliated with the Star of Nagran.

"Without the support of their affiliates, no cause can wield any power. A cause gives birth to influence, and influence in turn gives power. What would happen if a third party appeared and offered those within the Star of Nagran a new and safe path?"

"..."

At that moment, a bright light sparked in Yuder's mind.

This was directly related to what the Cavalry was striving to accomplish.

"...You mean offering them new job opportunities, money, and a life of freedom?"

"Exactly. If they no longer have to live in hiding and are provided with money and freedom, I'm really curious what choices those who've had only two options will make."

If the existing causes were to disappear, then all actions taken thus far would lose their power. While neither the sage nor Nahan would easily give up their plans, all that would be left after the causes vanished would be their transparent desires.

Kishiar flashed a warm smile.

Yuder felt the corners of his lips rise involuntarily.

"Many from the western branch and those residing here from the Star of Nagran will have much to contribute in this recruitment."

...

Finally, the second recruitment for the Cavalry officially began.

The moment news spread that all regional administrative offices of the Empire were accepting recruitment applications, people began to line up in droves.

"Move! I was here first!"

"What are you talking about? I've been here since dawn!"

"Hey, let's be friendly. We're going to be comrades if we pass."

The fervor for the application was even more intense than initially anticipated. Even the complacent administrators and provincial nobility were taken aback.

Physical transformation Awakeners, who usually lived in hiding, emerged after a long time. Many parents who had children awakened at a young age also came to apply.

And peculiarly, although they were a minority, even perfectly healthy nobles began to apply.

The reason was simple. Revlin Shand Apeto and Pruelle Van Tain, who had been a temporary member until now, had shocked the aristocratic world once again by being the first to line up and submit their application for full-time membership. Inspired by them, some young nobles who had been hiding their awakened abilities began to apply as well.

The Cavalry dispatched first-round members to various regions to sort the applications. Those who had lied about being an Awakener or those with ill intentions were eliminated like the receding tide in the first round.

Those who passed were gathered at a designated location for the second round of tests. This time, the first-round dispatched members met each applicant in person to test their abilities and conduct interviews to judge their suitability. Those who seemed unfit for life as a member, but still wished to work as an Awakener, were earmarked for future employment in new branches.

"So, they're hiring and paying people even before a branch exists? Does that make sense?"

"The Duke of Peletta and His Majesty are generously supporting it. They're even providing accommodations for those without homes."

"Is that really true?"

As rumors spread, more and more people flocked to apply, making the work of the first-round members increasingly difficult. Despite their relentless effort day and night, their faces were full of joy as they sent their reports back to the capital.

At the same time, in the western branch of the Cavalry, the first branch to be created, Marty and Robel, who had become rumored as a happily awakened couple, were having a conversation.

"Robel, we've received a letter from the south. Stop what you're doing and come read it."

"Got it!"

Dropping the load he was carrying, Robel rushed in and hastily opened the letter. A complex smile formed on his face as he read it. Noticing the expression, Marty asked with a concerned look.

"What does it say? It's a letter from the Star of Nagran, right?"

"Yes. It seems they couldn't believe the details I sent last time. Now that the second recruitment phase has started in the south, they finally seem ready to believe. They're asking for more details."

The letter had come from a colleague who had moved to a southern base from their old western base. Robel had spent months secretly trying to establish a line of communication with other members of the Star of Nagran. They trusted each other enough not to reveal Robel's new role in the Cavalry.

The letter discussed how many people from the western base were struggling to adapt to life in the south, how they didn't want to live this way forever, and how they all wanted to achieve freedom, if possible.

This implied that, although they couldn't entirely let their guard down about Robel leaving the Star of Nagran, the internal situation was becoming so tense that they couldn't ignore it.

"Everything is happening just as the Commander predicted," Marty, who had recently learned to read, murmured as he looked at the letter.

"Yes. According to him, there seems to be a fair number of people inside who are willing to leave if given the opportunity. It'd be good if we could help."

Without hesitation, Robel quickly wrote a reply and headed toward Emun Philang, the respectable official branch leader of the western branch.

Emun, who had been busily reviewing applications, broke into a tired but genuine smile.

"This should be sufficient to send now. I'll share the news with the members in the south as well. Thank both of you."

"It's nothing. It's what we should be doing."

"The Commander and Yuder will be grateful too."

At that, Robel and Marty exchanged awkward smiles.

Turning

Chapter 589

While the branch members in the west were diligently working on the second wave of recruitment, the capital was anything but idle. Those who had witnessed the activities of the Cavalry up close were more enthusiastic about the recruitment than any other region.

Moreover, people were flocking from all over, including the relatively close Central regions, making every member busy beyond measure.

"Wait, this person is from the North. Why did they apply here? Did they send their documents to the wrong place?"

"They say they don't want to live there anymore. They think applying in the capital, where the Cavalry headquarters is located, is more fair and trustworthy. We can't force someone who has lost their hometown loyalty to go back."

"Ah... I see. That makes sense, I suppose."

"It's not just one or two people like this. I even heard that someone from another country inquired about joining yesterday."



"Really, from another country?"

Amidst the members who couldn't hide their surprise, Gayle and Doyle roamed around. While the busy members paid no attention to them, the brothers found this rather favorable. They were in high spirits, particularly now that they were given responsibilities similar to the others.

"Hosanna, we're here."

The brothers entered the room where Hosanna was staying, their faces flushed with excitement. Hosanna, who was sitting on the bed knitting, looked up. Beside him was Priest Lusan, who was also holding knitting needles and stood up as he noticed the brothers.

"Oh, your friends have arrived. How time flies. I will take my leave now."

"...Yes."

"I will practice the knit and purl stitches you taught me today."

The Priest, with a basket of yarn and needles hanging from his side, left the room, his eyes sparkling. As soon as the door closed, Gayle and Doyle immediately asked,

"Hosanna, were you teaching him how to knit?"

"What's going on? You must be getting better if you can knit now."

Hosanna, the once frail young man from the South, looked much improved after receiving treatment from Lusan and Enon. Although he still couldn't walk on his own, his condition had improved enough for him to move around the room.

Yet, his awakened abilities had not returned. He tried to use his power about once a day but felt almost nothing. Knowing this, neither Gayle nor Doyle asked if his power had returned.

"There's nothing much to say... He asked what I used to do to pass the time in winter, and when I said I knitted, he brought some yarn and asked me to teach him. That's all."

"Really? We've never seen you knit. When did you do all that?"

Hosanna fell silent for a moment at Gayle's question, then spoke.

"Before. Before I came to the stronghold."

"Oh, right... before that time."

Before the stronghold meant before becoming a Star of Nagran. Only then did the brothers understand Hosanna's complicated expression and scratched their heads.

"Hmm, Hosanna. Do you know why it's been so noisy outside lately?"

"I heard they're recruiting new members for the Cavalry."

"Exactly, and that's why we're helping out this time."

"...You guys?"

Caught off guard, Hosanna's response was a beat slower than usual.

"How are you going to help when you're not even members?"

"You mean we're not just grunts, so there's more we can do? I've heard there's a surprising amount of heavy lifting involved. The assistant to the leader of that scary Cavalry asked us to help with the practical exam if possible. I guess it's a bit difficult to hire someone whose skills aren't as good as ours. Hehe."

The brothers chattered on, brimming with anticipation about the Cavalry recruitment. Their faces glowed like those of ordinary young men as they spoke about how many people had already gathered and how lively the atmosphere within the Cavalry was.

'Gayle and Doyle... Who knew they could wear such expressions?'

Hosanna looked at them, feeling their faces had become strangely unfamiliar, and slightly bit his lip.

'But it doesn't make sense. The Cavalry knows better than anyone that those two are the Stars of Nagran. Yet they asked for help in recruitment... Does this mean they're planning something else?'

His sharply darting thoughts gradually lost momentum and halted. Hosanna glanced down at the tangled bundle of thread he had been fiddling with. The person who brought the thread couldn't have known, but it was the warm white color he had once loved.

To be honest, since waking up in the Cavalry, Hosanna had not experienced the kind of dangerous and painful events he had anticipated. When it was time, wholesome meals were served. A gruff but somehow insightful pharmacist and a priest with a cat-like countenance appeared, aiding his treatment and rehabilitation.

The closest thing to an interrogation he had was the times he met a short-haired woman named Kanna. Hosanna had serious doubts about whether she viewed their discussion time as a legitimate opportunity to slack off. Kanna spent much more time asking about his daily life and past than about the Star of Nagran. Even when he remained silent, she often rambled on before departing.

Once, he had responded, "Persuading me like this is pointless. I will never speak ill of my lord. Using me to lure him is futile, so stop this nonsense." At that, Kanna burst into laughter, confusing Hosanna.

Her cheerful reply was, "I get it. If you don't want to talk, then don't. When have I ever forced you to speak?"

And of course... she never had.

Kanna spoke softly, her bright blue eyes seeming to understand Hosanna's confusion.

"You already know your sins better than anyone else. You just can't let go, that's all. Well, knowing that is knowing everything, isn't it?"

The people here, while pressuring him for nothing, seemed to know everything about him. Even without speaking, it felt like they already knew the answers. While that was terrifying, something heavy that had always weighed on his heart seemed to lighten.

He started to cut back on his anxious efforts to regain his powers, from repeated attempts to just once a day. Ironically, he felt better now, unable to use any abilities at all.

Continuing to watch Gayle and Doyle excitedly discussing future plans, Hosanna impulsively spoke up.

"So, you two have really decided to stay here for the long term?"

"Yeah? Yep, that's right."

Doyle responded.

"But it's not just us. I heard some people captured in the west are also helping out in that branch, and some who were imprisoned are participating in city reconstruction."

"...People captured in the west? Is that true? They weren't executed?"

This was news to him, startling enough to question his own ears. At Hosanna's surprised query, Gayle nodded.

"So, the Cavalry leader said... what was it? He would give us a chance to understand what we've done wrong or something like that? Anyway, that's what he said. We were both surprised."

"A chance to understand what we've done wrong..."

Hosanna repeated the words, his lips trembling. He thought that maybe, just maybe, those words had a meaning similar to what Kanna had once told him.

"But that's not all, Hosanna. Some of the people here who haven't committed any crimes have signed proper contracts with the Cavalry, getting paid for work. We've decided to do the same this time."

"A contract?"

"Yes."

The brothers excitedly explained the contract. According to them, the Cavalry had originally offered them the chance to join as members. However, they had declined the offer, choosing instead to remain employed within the headquarters as they had been.

"A chance to become members... Do you really believe that?"

"Why wouldn't we? We've paid for our mistakes."

"But still... isn't it better to be a member than an employee?"

"No, we don't want that."

Unexpectedly, the brothers shook their heads, their faces stern and resolute.

"You don't understand the harshness of the training here because you haven't seen it. I've never seen people train so hard in my life. Even if you beat me to death, I won't do it!"

"...What?"

"I prefer to work in the way we have been, doing regular jobs. They even teach us to read and write here. We've already signed a contract that includes a house."

"Yeah, yeah, it's a new house in the Seventh Wall District. We didn't know much about housing contracts, but people helped us out. It's a bit small, but it gets plenty of sunlight. There's even a tiny garden..."

"We'll grow vegetables there. Pumpkins, carrots, lettuce. There'll be more than enough for the two of us, so we can share some with you, Hosanna. Come visit us."

"..."

Did they really think that Hosanna could just leisurely visit their home? The conversation felt so surreal that he was momentarily stunned.

"Oh, by the way, Hosanna. We were told it's okay to tell you this... You remember when the assistant to the leader mentioned that people who might be from the Star of Nagran have been spotted in the capital recently?"

"...Yes. What about it?"

"They've found where those people are staying. And from what we've heard, it seems they're people we know."

For a moment, Hosanna's eyes widened.

"When the assistant asked if we'd like to help with this, he mentioned that if we recognize anyone, we should tell them. He described their appearances and abilities a bit, and... it's pretty certain that Nezo and Langbarton are there."

"Nezo and Langbarton? They wouldn't have come this far without the sage."

"Exactly. Ah, but there was also someone middle-aged among them."

Doyle hesitated, watching Hosanna's reaction.

"...The sage is in the capital? Now?"

"There can't be many people of that age other than him, but it could also be someone else. You never know, it could be someone like Diemon who has acquired shapeshifting abilities and is masquerading as an older man."

"Was there anyone... anyone who looked like Nahan?"

Hosanna's voice trembled. The brothers shook their heads.

"If that guy was there, he would have asked you first, not us."

"Right, I see... But I still can't believe the sage would come here. He's not the type to frequent places like this. If he really did come, wouldn't he have come to save us...? No, but why is he here and not in the west when Nahan hasn't even returned yet?"

Hosanna's voice wavered in confusion before becoming softer.

"We don't really know either. But it's what the leader's assistant said, so it's probably not a lie. He might even come to ask you soon, so don't be too shocked."

The three of them simultaneously thought of a man with dark hair and eyes, one so cold that just approaching him felt like the onset of winter. Yuder Aile appeared before them only in crucial moments.

And for Hosanna, that man had once directly saved his life.

Even after his brothers had left, Hosanna stared at his knitting needle for a long time.

'What's happened to Lord Nahan? Should I really be doing this...?'

No matter how much he pondered, his thoughts inevitably converged to a single point: a faint envy for his brothers who now dreamt and laughed about a normal future.

What would it have been like if he and Nahan could have originally come to such a place?

Nahan would have coldly scoffed at such an impossible thought. But for Hosanna, whether it was on the Star of Nagran or with the Cavalry, all that mattered was a place of safety. Even the beliefs loudly proclaimed by his master, Nahan, weren't all that important to him.

All that mattered were Nahan's life and safety, and his own guilt.

'Lord Nahan couldn't have passed away so effortlessly. He must have left the moment he found out I failed my mission. Given my limitations now, I can be of no help to him. There's nothing I can do.'

Hosanna laid down, pressing a hand lightly against his constricted chest.

Just then, a knock on the door echoed as someone entered the room. Hosanna, opening his eyes that had been shut, was startled to see the two men who had stepped in.

"Good, you're awake. That's fortunate."

A man, beautiful as if an avatar of the sun god, sat beside his bed, his expression unreadable as he smiled. Behind him stood not Yuder Aile with his usual dark hair, but a southern knight.

The moment Hosanna saw the knight's face, his body involuntarily trembled. How could he not recognize him?



It was the very knight who had singlehandedly shattered all of Nahan and Hosanna's plans—Nathan Zuckerman.

"I heard you've been improving lately. Do you think we could talk for a moment?"

Turning

Chapter 590

"I heard your condition has improved lately. Can we talk for a moment?"

Hosanna had struggled to calm his rapid breathing and had nodded.

Since his arrival, Commander Kishiar of the Cavalry unit had never directly interrogated him. Hosanna assumed it was because he was deemed of little value, which ironically gave him some relief.

But why had the Commander come now, especially when he was accompanied by a knight?

The only reason the Commander might have come to see him at this hour was... had they discovered Nahan? If not, the only other thing that came to mind was the story Gayle and Doyle had shared earlier.

His heart raced wildly.

"You look like you'll faint before we even start our conversation. Perhaps you should have some tea first. Nathan, prepare the tea."

"Yes."

"No, no, no, that's not necessary..."

Without daring to look directly at Nathan, Hosanna quickly responded.

"I don't need it."

The idea of drinking tea seemed more terrifying than talking to the Commander. He was certain that if he took even a sip of the tea the knight offered, he'd be plagued by nightmares for days.

Kishiar, after observing Hosanna's desperate voice and pale face for a moment, tilted his head and canceled the order for tea. Only then did Hosanna feel a bit relieved. However, he couldn't escape Kishiar's gaze.

"..."

"..."

In the silence, Kishiar simply stared at the trembling Hosanna. After a while, Hosanna hesitantly looked up at the man who didn't speak. And in front of those piercing eyes, he momentarily lost himself.

"Ah..."

It was his first time seeing Commander Kishiar up close. He was so terrified that he didn't expect to notice anyone's appearance, but the face before him was so captivating that he couldn't think of anything else.

The relaxed posture, the elegantly folded hands over his lap.

The Commander's gaze, which he had expected to be intimidating, was surprisingly gentle and calm. He looked as if he would patiently wait forever for the person in front of him to calm down.

The deep red eyes that stared softly at him.

Strangely, his mind felt hazy, and his trembling subsided.

Lost in his thoughts, Hosanna was brought back to reality when he noticed the Commander suddenly narrowing his eyes. Panic struck him.

‘What have I done... How dare I stare directly at the Commander?’

Seeing Hosanna's confusion, Kishiar chuckled and asked, "Did you enjoy the view?"

"I... I didn't..."

"Well, I've been handsome since birth, so I'm used to such reactions. Even my assistant once admitted that my only strong point is my good looks."

"..."

"It's rare for him to admit anything easily, but he said that without hesitation. Isn't that cute? So, it's not strange for you to be so captivated."

What was happening? Hosanna's mind was a whirlwind.

He was still scared, but the words he heard were so refined, yet the content was odd and frivolous, making it all feel bizarre.

Who was calling whom cute? Did he mishear? Seeing the confusion in Hosanna's eyes, the man continued with a mischievous smile.

"In moments like these, don't you think the listener should join in? Singing my own praises feels a tad awkward, even for me."

"Uh... Ah..."

Hosanna barely mumbled a response, then closed his mouth. He couldn't believe that the man unabashedly bragging about his good looks was the same fearsome Commander of the Cavalry, a Duke from the imperial family no less.

'I've never heard that the Commander of the Cavalry had such a personality...'

"Now, do you have any idea why I'm here?" the man inquired, addressing the bewildered Hosanna.

"I assume it might have something to do with Nahan..."

"True, he has recently appeared in the capital. But that's not why I'm here."

"What?"

Hosanna perked up. Although Kishiar had said, 'that's not why I'm here,' all Hosanna heard was that first part.

My God. Nahan was alive. And if he had come to the capital, he must have been well enough for long-distance travel. A warm sensation gathered at the corners of Hosanna's eyes, and he bit his lip.

"Nahan is in the capital? Is this true?"

"The fact that he's alive has already been confirmed, so it's not surprising. What's important is why he would give up fleeing and come all the way here."

For a moment, thoughts of past conversations with Gayle and Doyle flashed through Hosanna's mind.

Awakeners from the Star of Nagran recently sighted in the capital.

The sage's close associates, and a mysterious figure believed to be the sage himself.

If the sage were really here, it wouldn't be strange for Nahan to follow. But whether the mission was a benign one, Hosanna couldn't be sure.

"..."

"You may have already heard, but Awakeners from the Star of Nagran are quite active in the capital lately, even earning a reputation as the Crown Prince's healers. Among them appears to be the one you call the sage. And not long after their appearance, Nahan arrived. It's reasonable to assume a connection."

"Don't you agree?" said the Commander of the Cavalry, smiling.

'The sage as the Crown Prince's healer...?'

For a moment, Hosanna felt dizzy.

He knew that the sage had started establishing some sort of connection with the higher-ups to protect the Star of Nagran. Indeed, thanks to that connection, Nahan had been able to rescue other Awakeners imprisoned by the Apeto Duke family.

Back then, Nahan accepted the help because the sage assured, "This is just one of the secret means to protect the Star of Nagran. None of those nobles know our true identity, and I have no plans to deepen the connection any further."

But did the sage really cut off that connection afterward?

Hosanna remembered the time when someone close to the Crown Prince had sought them out to cure his headache. Ostensibly, it was about headache relief, but in reality, it was a risky maneuver to test them for treating the reclusive Crown Prince.

Back then, what had Nahan, who managed to escape from that situation, asked Hosanna?

'Hosanna, what do you think the sage would say about the Crown Prince?'

And what had Hosanna replied?

'He is a good man; he won't put us in such risky situations again. At least I hope so.'

'Yes, we can only hope so.'

At the time, he had merely thought the words to be a bit odd and hadn't taken them seriously. Why would he care what the Crown Prince or the nobles had in mind? He had no intention of getting further involved with them.

However, after his and Nahan's disappearance and the sage making a point to come all the way to the capital, he had to reconsider. If the sage was truly building a reputation among the nobility as a healer, then the only reasonable explanation had to be related to the events back then.

Nahan's abilities were not primarily intended for healing either. So, surely, the sage and his followers could mimic something similar.

'Am I overthinking this? But if my suspicions are correct... and if Nahan found out about it after arriving at the southern base—'

Nahan knew about it, he would certainly confront the Sage directly to confirm his intentions, regardless of how many soldiers were on the lookout to arrest him in the capital.

Although it seemed that Nahan would follow whatever the sage said, Hosanna knew there were standards he held. He differed slightly from others who were simply charmed by the sage's humanity. Nahan had always been faithful to the cause of the Star of Nagran and its Awakeners.

He had a goal and a dream: to save his comrades through his own strength, without begging for mercy or pretending to the corrupt powers that be.

This had been a promise since they first met the sage in the desert and jointly adopted the name of the Star of Nagan.

But what if Nahan were to conclude that the promise had been broken?

If the sage did not refute this or failed to persuade Nahan as before...

"Every Awakener from the Star of Nagan we've encountered has consistently spoken of discord between Nahan and the sage. We already know how much Nahan despises the nobility. I highly doubt he would travel all this way to aid the sage, who has now become the healer for the Crown Prince," Kishiar spoke slowly, making his throat go dry. No matter how much he swallowed, it felt like he had swallowed a needle.

"Who do you think would win?"

"What are you talking about?"

"If Nahan and the sage were to fight, who would come out on top?"

Hosanna's shoulders, which had been moving up and down, came to a sudden halt.

"What a strange thing to say. The sage has always looked after and protected us. While it's true that Nahan can be a bit brusque... He too acts for the sake of our people. Such an event is impossible."

"Are you certain?"

"..."

"Then why has no one come to find you and your captured comrades after the incident in the west?"

"That's because...!"

"Don't tell me it's because the Cavalry is fearsome. That's not an answer in this situation."

Hosanna's lips trembled; his head felt like it was about to burst.

"I don't know anything. I can't say anything."

"Hosanna, if I were you, I'd think more deeply about protecting what's important, rather than claiming ignorance. How good do you think the situation is for you now, given that you can't even walk? Even we in the Cavalry know how much Nahan despises the nobility. Do you think the sage, who has now sided with them, would be merciful to him?"

Hosanna wanted to block his ears from Kishiar's soft-spoken words. But his hands wouldn't move.

"It's truly odd. You don't even believe the situation will be peacefully resolved, yet you fail to notice the contradiction."

"I... I should go..."

And there it was, the piercing discomfort of an unresolved dilemma, hanging heavily in the air.

The inside of his eyes burned as if inflamed. Even as Hosanna gasped and mumbled, Kishiar maintained his tranquil voice and posed a question.

"Now, may I ask you something at this point?"

"..."



"Ever since I learned about this matter, I've instructed my men to ask a particular question to all the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran that we are protecting. Strangely enough, no one has been able to give a proper answer. Or rather, it seems like they didn't even hear the question in the first place."

But this time, he hoped it would be different. That's why he had come. With those thoughts, the man opened his perfectly formed lips and asked again.

"..."

"Do you remember what the sage's power is?"

For a moment, all sound seemed to stop.

He definitely heard something, but he couldn't quite grasp it. It was like the wind, entering one ear and exiting the other.

However, moments later, Nathan Zuckerman appeared in Hosanna's field of vision. Realizing that the southern knight was looking at him with a stoic expression, a sudden surge of fear pierced through the dusty air filling Hosanna's mind. Within that eerie sensation, he faintly recalled the words he had just heard.

Fear, oddly enough, cleared his mind. It was a very strange feeling.

"Ah..."

Hosanna hunched over, clutching his head. Shivering for no discernible reason, he opened his mouth.

"The sage, the sage's power, you say? That is... I... I..."

He knew. It was something everyone on the Star of Nagran knew very naturally.

But he strangely couldn't speak it. As if he had forgotten all the words that could describe it. It was as if he only now realized that an unseen hand had been muffling his mouth.

'What on Earth is this...'

"As expected, you can't answer."

Kishiar murmured quietly.

"If you ever become able to answer this question, we'll meet again."

He rose from his seat. The shadow of his towering figure cast over the bed.

Hosanna remained huddled in place, dazed, as he heard the door close behind him.

"To break a mind-shaking power, one needs a mind-shaking chaos," Kishiar said as he exited Hosanna's room, moving forward.

"Judging by the fact he could barely comprehend my question, it seems like it's having some effect, Nathan."