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Chapter 61

'The Red Stone must never fall into the hands of the Dukes and the Crown Prince...'

'...'

"Sir, your tea has cooled. I will dispose of it and pour a fresh cup."

Kishiar, reflecting on the Emperor's last words, blinked and straightened his posture. As Nathan had pointed out, the tea in front of him had completely cooled.

The training that had been ongoing before his eyes seemed to have taken a brief respite, as Yuder, Gakane, and Kanna were all sitting on the ground, engaged in a conversation.

"No, it's fine. I'll be leaving now."

Kishiar rose from his seat, his gaze lingering on them. He had intentionally refrained from making any noise to avoid disrupting the training, so he didn't attract the attention of the three.

"Nathan, even in my absence, have a few pairs of eyes nearby so that we can know how the training progresses."

"Understood."

Nathan bowed his head as he cleared away the teacups. As Kishiar prepared to return to his quarters, he turned as though a thought had suddenly occurred to him.

"...Ah. And if my assistant shows any signs of abnormality, no matter how slight, report it immediately without making any judgments."

His gaze lingered on Yuder Aile's gloved hand, then vanished.

"That's it for today. Starting from tomorrow, come out an hour earlier, run through the basic physical training course, and be prepared."

"..."

"Answer."

"Yes..."

"Understood..."

Upon hearing Yuder's firm voice, Gakane and Kanna managed to respond, gasping for breath. They lay strewn about on the training ground with no sign of getting up.

The moment Yuder turned to leave, Nathan, who had been watching from afar, gestured as if he had been waiting.

"The Duke has instructed you to go to his quarters once training is over."

"...Understood."

Yuder had thought Nathan would accompany him, but Nathan had other tasks and disappeared somewhere. Thus, Yuder had to climb the stairs alone.

Gakane and Kanna, looked at Yuder, still standing strong even after helping with the grueling training, as if he were a monster. But in reality, he was far from fine.

His body, which had been subjected to harsh training until sunset, throbbed with each step, and he had a substantial headache along with a pit in his stomach where his mana hole was. It was because he had pushed his strength to its limit.

'If it were the old days, I wouldn't have thought it to be this hard... Returning to the past has certainly changed my condition.'

"Commander, I'll go in now."

Yuder knocked on the door at the top floor upon arrival and immediately entered. Kishiar, seated at his desk, studying something, glanced up at Yuder and smiled.

"You look quite tired."

"If it's not tiring, it's not training."

"True."

Nodding, Kishiar rose from his seat. Lighting a magic stone casually, he walked around the warmth-radiating stove and sat in the guest chair.

"Come this way."

Yuder slowly moved toward the chair opposite Kishiar, his gaze inadvertently drifting towards the stove.

His sword was beautifully positioned on top of the stove as it had been today. Its unusual aura was the same as before, but Yuder suddenly felt that the sword was somehow different from before.

'The energy... it's somehow different from before.'

Today, the peculiar energy that had previously reached out so blatantly as if to guard against him was absent. He wasn't sure if it was just his mood, or a temporary situation, but Kishiar didn't make any comment, whether he noticed it or not.

Yuder sat down and decided to silently wait for whatever Kishiar had to say to him.

'He'll probably talk about today's training.'

"Would you take off your gloves?"

But, as always, Kishiar diverged from Yuder's expectations. Yuder maintained a silent pause for a moment, then his face hardened in surprise.

"Pardon?"

"I'm talking about the gloves. The ones I gave you."

Kishiar repeated his request more explicitly, thinking that Yuder hadn't fully understood him.

"Why the gloves, all of a sudden? Do I have to take them off?"

"I want to check something. Or, did you perhaps find a reason that you can't take them off?"

What more could be said when the one who gave the gloves was asking such a thing? Yuder hesitated for a moment, but then slowly began to remove his left glove first, then tugged at the end of the right glove.

However, when half of the back of his hand was revealed, his movement halted as if time had frozen.

"Just as I suspected," Kishiar said, sweeping his gaze over the back of Yuder's hand.

"Why didn't you mention this earlier?"

"How did you know?"

Yuder looked down at the purplish speckles that nearly covered the back of his hand. He felt a strange sensation, like a child caught hiding something. The situation was indeed not very different.

Yuder quickly hid his surprise and spoke as calmly as possible.

"I didn't think you had clairvoyant abilities."

"Of course, I don't. But, I thought now was the most appropriate time to check."

After saying that, Kishiar lightly tugged at one side of the glove hanging from Yuder's fingertips and pulled it off completely.

"When you explained the circumstances of your previous injury, you mentioned that the speckles started out very small and grew this big after defeating those intruders. So, I thought the speckles might also grow when you use your ability... but you didn't have a chance to use your ability since then, right?"

Just as Kishiar said, there hadn't been a need to use his power since retrieving the Red Stone and visiting the palace.

However, on the day Yuder drove out Count Gallon by force, he discovered that the speckles on the back of his hand had slightly grown after taking off his gloves at night.

Thinking it might recover on its own, he left it alone, but seeing how it had changed after a whole day of training, the cause and effect became undeniably clear. It was just as Kishiar had guessed.

"Why didn't you report immediately after the incident with Count Gallon?"

"At that time, the change wasn't clear perhaps because I hadn't used my power for a long time. There was also no pain, so I thought maybe... I'm sorry."

Regardless of the reason, he had to apologize. As Yuder immediately bowed his head, Kishiar clicked his tongue lightly from above. It seemed as if he understood Yuder wasn't accustomed to reporting every personal issue.

"Do you still feel no pain? What if I press it like this?"

Before Yuder could react, Kishiar grabbed his hand and pressed his thumb on the speckles.

"...It feels normal."

"Any unusual sensation when you use your power?"

"None."

Yuder answered promptly, but Kishiar, as if not believing, probed several times

He had answered obediently, but Kishiar didn't seem to believe him, pressing various spots on the back of his hand several times. It was only after confirming that there was no change in Yuder's expression that Kishiar showed signs of believing him somewhat.

"Alright. Let's try healing now."

"Are you sure? You said I should treat this power as if it doesn't exist."

When Yuder asked cautiously, Kishiar chuckled.

"I did. But where will you go to heal this injury? To a temple? A wound that doesn't fully heal is often seen as a sign of a curse. Even if the priests don't think you're cursed, they might find it strange and report it to their superiors."

"..."

"What do you think would happen then?"

Kishiar, who asked as if he was curious, slowly sprinkled a white light over Yuder's hand as he continued speaking.

"You'd be dragged off without a bird or a mouse knowing, to deep within the main mountain of the Temple of the Sun God. There, under the guise of a noble sacrifice for all humanity, you'd be put on the experiment table."

"...You're not lying? If such things happened, why hasn't there been any rumor?"

Yuder, combining his experiences from his previous life, knew more about the internal affairs of the temple and the priests than the average person. But he had never heard of such things as Kishiar described.

When he questioned skeptically, Kishiar let out a light laugh.

"Isn't it obvious? The dead don't speak, hence no rumors."

With a single sentence, the noble main mountain of the Temple of the Sun God transformed into a terrifying group that wouldn't hesitate to commit murder. Considering the speaker was a member of the imperial family who wielded the power of the Sun God, there was no greater blasphemy.

"I heard that priests who blaspheme against the God lose their divine power, but it seems that's not true."

"I'm not a priest."

"..."

Something was strange, but he couldn't argue against the truth. After a few more such absurd exchanges that left Yuder speechless, Kishiar gathered the white light and slowly pulled his hand away.

"Indeed, it's better now."

However, it was not entirely healed. The spot that had covered Yuder's hand was reduced to about the size it was when he first got injured.

"...Thank you."

"If you appreciate it, come straight to me when there's a change next time."

That seemed to mean he would have to receive this type of treatment from Kishiar every time he used his power.

Was it really necessary to go that far when there was no pain and it just got a bit bigger? Now he knew for sure when the spot changed and that it got better when he received treatment.

After hesitating for a moment, Yuder spoke.

"Do I... have to do that? There's no pain, so it seems alright to just leave it alone for a while and see what changes occur."

"That's reckless. What if that spot spreads and reaches your heart or vital organs, and turns out to be a type of curse that kills instantly? You only have one life, and I only have one assistant, so take the treatment when I offer it."

"But if we have to do this every time..."

Divine power was a force that was wielded at the expense of the user's vitality. Thankfully, Kishiar's complexion was still healthy, but Yuder felt a great burden as if he was accumulating a debt to him.

If he had to think about holding hands with him and getting treated every time, he wouldn't be able to use his power properly in critical moments.

As Yuder swallowed his words and trailed off, Kishiar smiled gently.

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"Now that we know the cause, we just need to find a complete cure. If we can understand the power held by the Red Stone, we might find the answer. If you feel burdened, well, then, take this."

Suddenly, Kishiar, who had stood up from his place, went over to the stove. Yuder wondered what he was doing, and to his surprise, he detached one of the decorative gems embedded in the sheath of his divine sword and came back. It was a slender, rhombus-shaped red gem.

"With divine power filled in it, carrying it should considerably slow down the progression."

"I'm not sure if I can accept such a valuable thing..."

"If you don't accept it, I'll have to come up and hold your hand every day, won't I? Ah, maybe that's what you hoped for?"

"Thank you for your consideration."

Yuder did not refuse a second time and quickly accepted it with a bow. Kishiar laughed.

"I'll overlook it until the range of that mark goes beyond your elbow. It should be fine up to that point. But not any further."

His words were extremely affectionate yet firm. After all, wasn't his intention to train the members to find out about the Red Stone?

In the history of the empire, Kishiar might have been the only imperial family member to treat a subordinate of humble origin with such care. However, Yuder didn't find it pleasant.

Yuder's return changed many aspects of Kishiar. However, some aspects remained the same.

In his previous life, even after the unpleasant incident involving Yuder, Kishiar had always been kind to him, and although he had built walls, he had treated him more than fairly. One couldn't deny that he was a very peculiar character, but he was never a bad person.

But how did it all end up?

'I need to figure out everything I can before my vacation ends.'

If he wanted to avoid getting entangled with Kishiar and protect his life, he needed to understand him better than in his previous life. There was still too much he didn't know.

For the next five days, except for meal times and sleep, Yuder trained Kanna and Gakane without a moment's rest.

Even the spectators were exhausted, but Yuder never showed any signs of fatigue. So, naturally, Kanna and Gakane could not show their tiredness either.

The two realized that all the training they had received in the Cavalry was nothing compared to Yuder's training. As they got a bit comfortable, he increased the difficulty, and as soon as they got used to that, he immediately noticed and tried even harder training.

It was astonishing how well he could come up with such brutal training methods.

"That's it for today. Let's take a day off tomorrow."

And finally, on the sixth day, Yuder quietly declared the end of the training with a face no different from when he started. Kanna and Gakane simultaneously collapsed on the training ground floor.

"Ah... I guess this is what feeling like death feels like..."

"Gakane, it's not feeling like death for me, I'm already dead."

Despite their words, the expressions of the two lying down were significantly brighter. It was because they had achieved clear results during the hellish six days.

Gakane had come to understand the limits of his shadow clone, and the movement, attack power, and defense power of the clone had grown so much that it couldn't be compared to before. It was thanks to being ripped and rolled thousands of times under Yuder's sword.

Kanna too had succeeded in selectively reading only the information of the book, not the heavens, from a book that spanned the sky. Thereupon, Yuder trained her in a similar fashion to place both hands simultaneously on two objects and read only the information from one, and when that was successful, he began to drop the objects very slightly from her fingertips.

At first, she thought it was impossible to read an object from a distance, but it wasn't. Kanna learned the astonishing fact that as long as an object merely touched the swirling energy flowing from her hands, she could read its information without touching it.

Of course, the distance was only about the length of a fingernail for now and the success rate was very low, but she would gradually increase it.

"Yuder, we're training with the other classmates starting the day after tomorrow, right?"

"Yes."

"Haha. I'm looking forward to it. Really."

Gakane laughed cheerfully with a face caked in dust. Yuder wondered if Gakane had become a little strange due to the excessive training over the past six days.

'As long as we continue like this, there won't be any sudden deaths wherever we go.'

Gakane's death had not yet come, but the situation was constantly changing, and they didn't know what would happen next.

However, if Gakane didn't lose his strong desire to become stronger and continued to train, he could achieve a rate of growth that couldn't be compared to the past.

"But Yuder. We're taking a break tomorrow, right? Do you have something to do? If not, with me..."

"Huh? I thought I heard a noise in the training ground, and here everyone is?"

As Gakane was about to say something to the absorbed Yuder, someone popped their face out from the dormitory. It was Ever, who had gone back to her hometown for vacation.

"Ever! You're back now?"

"Kanna. I came back early after seeing my family. But....."

As Kanna stood up with a half-smile, Ever began to approach with a smile but stopped short.

"Why do you all look like that? Covered in dust."

"Oh, yes. Hahaha. We three didn't take a vacation, right? We had nothing to do, so we did some independent training and ended up like this."

"But what kind of training did you do to....."

Kanna stuttered as she glanced at Yuder's expression. It wasn't time to let the other members know why they had been training so hard. Fortunately, Ever didn't suspect much.

"Training is good, but do it moderately. But if you've been here the whole time... Do you know when those strange people outside arrived?"

Ever's last question was directed at Yuder. After a moment of thought, Yuder opened his mouth.

"Strange people, what do you mean?"

"Oh. Didn't you see? I saw a suspicious duo on my way back to the dormitory. They were going around the Imperial Knight's grounds, grabbing anyone and asking about the Cavalry, so I avoided them."

"A duo?"

"How could such people enter here?"

Kanna and Gakane asked, their faces full of incomprehension. Yuder, hearing the word "duo", pondered for a moment before throwing a question at Ever.

"Did you happen to get a good look at their appearances?"

"One was an old man. He had a very long beard. And the other was young, but they didn't look like a grandfather and grandson."

The look in Yuder's eyes changed instantly. He seemed to know who they were. It was Thais Yulman, the elder mage of the Pearl Tower, whom he had met in the imperial palace, and his apprentice. As if recalling the same memory, Kanna turned her surprised face toward Yuder.

"Yuder. Could they be the ones we saw at the imperial palace...? Did the Count send people again?"

"It has nothing to do with the Count."

Yuder answered succinctly, shaking his head.

"But the people we saw, they must be the ones. They said they're looking for the Cavalry. We should go meet them."

"In that state?"

Ever asked incredulously. Yuder glanced down at his uniform, which was more dirty than its original black, and nodded.

"Yes."

"Yuder. I want to go with you."

"Me too."

Upon hearing this, Kanna and Gakane immediately rose to their feet and volunteered to follow. Every time they moved, dust billowed up, causing Ever to crinkle her nose.

"Nobody will believe the three of you are from the Cavalry in that state. I'll come too."

The Cavalry's quarters were situated in the most remote corner of the Imperial Knight's compound. The Knights, proud of their Imperial Knight's ground, treated the intruding Cavalry as an eyesore, practically ignoring them as if they didn't exist.

It was easy to enter the compound of the Imperial Knights, but no one among the wandering Knights reacted to the name of the Cavalry. Therefore, anyone visiting the Cavalry for the first time could never find their destination.

Respected elder Thais Yulman of the Pearl Tower and his apprentice, Alik Pelgin, were also struggling, wandering around the vast compound since morning.

"Master. Wouldn't it have been better to send a formal letter to Duke Peletta expressing our wish to visit first? If we continue like this, we'll spend the whole day wandering around."

"You imbecile. Make sense. Do you think if I said I wanted to go there, the Duke of Peletta would welcome me warmly? If the Red Stone is in their hands, they wouldn't accept any outside visitors, especially us from the Pearl Tower! So it's best to go and try our luck!"

"But first, we need to find them to take a shot, don't we? Moreover, we're not even sure if the stone is really there."

"We've already confirmed it's not in the palace. There's nothing more certain than the information leaked by the Duke of Diarca. They purposely leaked it to me, so we have nothing to lose. Stop complaining and move forward."

Alik felt extremely aggrieved. Their purpose wasn't suspicious at all, so what was wrong with contacting them beforehand?

He had long gotten used to his master's eccentricities, but it was heartbreaking to see himself suffer like this.

"There are a few more Knights over there. Go ask them."

Just then, a few Knights with flashy swords appeared before their eyes. The Knight in the lead, who was guiding two young men, was particularly arrogant and sharp-looking, undoubtedly from a noble family.

Alik, pushed by his master, timidly approached them.

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"I am a visitor and wish to ask for something."

"Excuse me?"

As soon as Alik spoke, the Knights halted their steps in unison. Alik quickly scanned the blue uniform of the leading knight, noticing the golden eagle emblem and three lilies engraved on it.

"I heard that somewhere around here, the Cav... no, the Duke of Peletta... is staying. I got lost while trying to find him. Could you kindly help me?"

Alik swiftly changed his words as he caught sight of the knight's expression twisting at the beginning of the word 'Cav'.

Every Imperial Knight they had encountered so far disappeared as soon as they heard the word 'Cav', but this was the first time one had become outright hostile.

"The Duke of Peletta? For what reason do you seek him?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't disclose that."

How could he tell them that he was a mage from the Pearl Tower, who had heard about the Red Stone and came to conduct some research? Moreover, he wasn't even an invited guest.

As Alik awkwardly smiled and shook his head, the knight studied him and Thais standing behind him, lost in thought. His deep, black eyes, shining arrogantly, turned fierce after a moment.

"Take these men and lock them up."

"Pardon?"

Alik couldn't believe his ears. Yet, the Knight's orders continued unabated.

"Considering they're hiding their purpose of visit, there's no doubt they're suspicious. They must be connected to those vile insects. We need to find out what they're planning. Arrest them immediately!"

The Knights behind him bowed their heads in response and rushed to seize Alik and Thais. Alik had been through a lot while serving his research-obsessed master, but being arrested by knights and facing the risk of imprisonment was a first.

"Wait, sir knight! We're not suspicious! We even have proper passes! If you check them, you'll see!"

"Such things can be easily forged."

"Then we can go to the imperial palace...! We have everything there to verify our identities!"

"The imperial palace? You expect me to believe that now?"

The knight smirked, looking them over in their shabby attire.

Today, Alik and Thais had dressed as commoners to maintain their anonymity. Therefore, they had left their pearl badges, which signified their membership in the Pearl Tower, at the Palace Mages' Tower.

If they had known this would happen, they would have definitely carried their badges! Alik heaved a deep sigh, but it was too late.

'Master, this is all your fault. You need to say something!'

As Alik internally fumed and turned his gaze towards his master, Thais, who had been quietly observing the knights holding his arms, finally spoke.

"Young knight, may I know your name?"

"I have no name to tell suspicious people."

"We merely asked for help because we were lost. Do you think it's right to arrest us without any evidence, circumstantial proof, or even verifying our names, simply based on speculation and emotion? Is this what the Imperial Knights, the pride of the Orr Empire, stand for?"

Thais had held the position of a senior member at the Pearl Tower for over 20 years, and it wasn't without reason. His voice was filled with a dignity and gravity that couldn't be easily dismissed.

It seemed the knights considered him an unusual man, as they exchanged glances, but the knight who stood at the forefront, bearing three lilies, merely snorted at his words.

"How dare you disparage the Imperial Knights with your foul tongue. I will not fall for such a ruse!"

"Sir Kiolle, even so, shouldn't we at least verify his identity before making such accusations? Or perhaps we could contact Duke Peletta..."

The knight beside him grumbled with an uncomfortable expression, but the one called Kiolle flared up at his words.

"Yelsin! Are you on his side too?"

"N-no, I'm not."

"Then keep your mouth shut and follow my orders!"

He had dealt with countless arrogant nobles, but Kiolle was different. Alik decided to never forget the name of this detestable man. Despite serving under his master as if he were a servant, Alik was a talented mage from a noble family with a surname.

The position of the elder's direct disciple was not obtained for no reason. Being looked down upon in this way for the first time, despite being expected by his peers to succeed his master and be the future of the tower, was a new experience for him.

'If our master, who became an elder through elemental magic, were here, he would've let out a blast of magic and put an end to this.'

However, Thais was a master of magic research, not offensive magic. Alik decided to give up any further confrontation, thinking he would have to call someone who could verify their identities once he was taken into custody.

That's when it happened.

"It seems those are the ones we're sure of."

"I told you so."

From afar, the sound of noisy voices reached them, and four figures appeared.

"It has to be them. I saw them being ignored when they asked where the Cavalry was earlier. I'm sure."

They were all wearing the same black uniform. But three of the four were so covered in dirt and dust that had it not been for the one clean-dressed among them, one would not have recognized they were in the same uniform.

Alik was staring blankly at their faces when he suddenly recognized one. A pale man with black hair. Trying hard to remember where he'd seen him before, he suddenly recalled.

'Right. The one who was fighting the noble in the palace! He definitely said he was from the Cavalry!'

Alik did not remember Kanna, who had been behind Yuder with her hood deeply drawn. However, even though he had only seen Yuder briefly, he had left a lasting impression in his memory.

"Excuse me, knights."

As soon as the Cavalry appeared, the gaze of the Imperial Knights sharpened. They menacingly placed their hands on their sword hilts, ready to draw at any moment. Among them, Kiolle's face was flushed with anger, as if he were about to explode at any moment.

"Filthy scoundrels. You have a lot of nerve showing up here."

"Cavalry members have the right to freely roam the grounds of the Imperial Knights. I'm not sure what you're talking about."

The black-haired man slightly tilted his head with an expressionless face. There seemed to be no intent in his factual statement, but it was enough to further irritate Kiolle.

"We heard that the two of them came looking for our Cavalry, so we came to find them. May I ask why you are detaining them?"

Alik was moved by the fact that someone had finally come to his rescue. However, Kiolle was quite the opposite.

"Shut your nonsense! You came here knowing I was present! Fine. Now that I've finally seen with my own eyes that you weren't expelled, let's settle this!"

Kiolle roared, but the man remained unruffled. He simply blinked his eyes slowly, as if looking at a stranger.

"Um... I apologize, but when have we met? I can't seem to remember who you are."

"...What?"

Could there possibly be a more humiliating and insulting situation?

Alik thought for a moment that Kiolle's face might explode. The other knights seemed to share the same sentiment, as they all held their breaths and glanced towards Kiolle.

However, seeing the strange expressions on the faces of the man's companions standing around him, it appeared that Kiolle and the man truly did not know each other.

"You... are saying... you can't remember me?"

Kiolle stammered, seeming unaware of his own stuttering.

"Was there something memorable? I don't think there was... Gakane, do you remember?"

The red-haired man referred to as Gakane gave Kiolle and the man a sidelong glance and awkwardly smiled.

"Uh... Yuder. You really don't remember? That... time when you, uh... did that thing to his sword. And he fell over... And the Commander even came and said something..."

"...Oh. That time. I remember now."

A flicker of light finally returned to the man's eyes, which had been dim until he heard the word "Commander." In contrast, Kiolle's face paled even more, consumed by extreme anger.

"How dare you insult me in such a way and hope to live? Fine. Draw your sword! I challenge you to a duel!"

"I'm not a knight, so I'm not obliged to accept a duel. Also, this sword is... just a blunt practice sword made of iron."

The man named Yuder calmly drew his sword slightly from its scabbard. As he had said, it was a worn and old practice sword without an edge.

Thanks to that, Kiolle ended up looking like a fool for recklessly challenging someone wielding a practice sword to a duel without even recognizing his opponent. The knights standing behind him couldn't bear to look at Kiolle anymore.

But the people standing behind Yuder had no need to hold back their laughter, and they openly shook with laughter. Alik felt regret that he couldn't join them in their mirth.

'What an impressive man. To reduce his opponent to a fool with such calm demeanor.'

"That's right. It's a waste to use a sword to punish mere insects!"

In the end, Kiolle lost his reason. Instead of a sword, he swung his hand to slap Yuder across the face.

"Yuder!"

Yuder's companions hurried to intervene. However, Alik felt a sudden strange wind gusting around Yuder at that moment.

"Uh... oh...!"

Kiolle's body twisted in the wind. He missed his target and swung his arm into thin air. Unable to resist the recoil, he tumbled forward, landing face-first onto the ground.

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"..."

An awful silence lingered.

Moments later, from the frozen crowd, Thais Yulman, who had been silent until now, burst out laughing for the first time.

"Hahaha! My goodness. The last time I saw something this ridiculous was eight years ago, when some fool vowed to create a spell that would force a monster to dance until it died of exhaustion!"

Shortly thereafter, as if caught up in his laughter, Yuder's comrades also began to chuckle, one by one.

"Hahaha... hahahahaha!"

Amidst the sea of laughter, Kiolle's fellow knights hurriedly helped him to his feet. Kiolle had fainted, his head hanging low.

They disappeared without a word, as if marching away in formation. It was a humorous sight, hardly befitting the reputedly most beautiful and honorable knights of the continent - the Imperial Knights of the Orr Empire.

"Yuder, how on earth did you do it? We thought you could only use fire and water!"

"Think of it as my own progress, just as you've progressed."

"Is it something to talk about so easily, having one more element you can use?"

Amid the unending laughter, Yuder, conversing calmly with the redhead, turned his gaze toward Alik. Alik, feeling as if his thoughts were being pierced by those eyes, nervously stammered.

"Hello. Do you, uh, remember us? You only met my master, to be precise....."

"Yes. I remember."

Luckily, Yuder replied coolly.

"I heard you were looking for the Cavalry. You don't seem to be invited guests, so may I ask what your business is?"

"Ah, that's....."

Alik cast a resentful look at his master, who was still laughing heartily. It was about time for him to step in. But the master showed no signs of doing so.

"My master has something very important to say to Duke Peletta, which is why we came suddenly. But the road... uh, it was harder than we thought. Haha....."

"Yes. It is difficult."

A faint, cool smile flashed across Yuder's lips and then disappeared. He had noticed Alik cursing the knights who had ignored their request for help.

"Follow me. I'll guide you."

Alik was quite surprised, as he had thought Yuder wouldn't be so compliant in offering help. But Yuder had already turned and was striding ahead.

"Master, that man said he would guide us. Shall we go?"

Alik grabbed the arm of his master, who was laughing so hard that tears were starting to form, and followed behind him.

"Alik. That guy, he's not an ordinary one."

Thais murmured low enough for only his disciple to hear as they neared the Cavalry barracks.

"I came to see the stone, but it seems I have one more subject to study."

"So, they're downstairs now?"

"Yes."

After leading the mages from the Pearl Tower to the guest lounge on the first floor of the Cavalry barracks, Yuder went straight up to meet Kishiar alone. Gakein had wanted to accompany him, fearing that Kishiar might be angry, but there was no need. Kishiar was far from angry; instead, he seemed very interested in the situation Yuder had created and resolved.

"Good. I know you wouldn't act thoughtlessly. Meeting Kiolle Diarca again is nothing but bad luck... Anyway, now that the situation has been explained, let's move on to the next step."

Yuder looked at Kishiar, who leaned back comfortably in his chair with a leisurely smile, carefully choosing his words.

"They did not clearly state so, but to my eyes, they are mages. Probably from the Pearl Tower. For such people to visit here, uninvited at this time, and only stating they need to see the Commander without making their purpose clear. They must have come for the Red Stone."

The old man with a long beard who casually mentioned magic. The disciple who respectfully called such an old man his master - they perfectly embodied the tradition of one-on-one mentorship typical of mages. If they were court mages, there would be no need to hide their identities, so the only remaining possibility was clear.

Of course, Yuder knew who they were immediately due to his memories from his past life, but he did not tell Kishiar that.

"If that's your interpretation, then so be it. So what?" Kishiar's eyes softened as he rested his chin on the hand propped on his armrest.

"How should I deal with the mages who have come for the Red Stone?"

"I think you need to figure out how they knew the stone was here and what they want to do with it. After all, you need to understand their intentions before you can use them."

"Use them..."

"Even if they came here because of the Tower's will, in the end, they are mages. 'Even if the tower crumbles tomorrow due to the magic cast today'..."

"'If you want to cast, cast it and face death.'... That's a maxim inscribed at the top of the Pearl Tower."

That saying was known to have been left by a mage who dedicated his entire life to the magic of moving objects and ultimately tried to pull the moon to the earth hundreds of years ago. His magic failed, but his words remained, etched as a motto that symbolizes the spirit of the entire Pearl Tower.

"So, are you suggesting that we should try to persuade them by appealing to the mages' greed?"

He didn't say it directly, but Kishiar immediately understood Yuder's meaning.

Mages of the Pearl Tower were famous for their fanatical obsession with the magic they were practicing. They didn't hesitate to engage in all sorts of unethical behaviors for the perfection of magic.

If Thais Yulman had no particular interest in the Red Stone and was forced to come here due to the will of the Tower, he wouldn't have bothered to leave the palace and even seek out the Cavalry. But he

came here in his shabby clothes and endured insults from the Imperial Knights without revealing his identity. Considering his major was researching such things, it could have yielded a good result.

"They did not seem like bad people. I plan to investigate the Red Stone with the help of a few members, including Kanna, but wouldn't it be better to have more help?"

"Originally, the court mages were going to investigate the stone first. Why should I persuade a mage from the Pearl Tower instead of them?"

"If you trusted them, wouldn't you have already entrusted the stone to the court mages, regardless of what I said?"

Yuder calmly spoke the most reasonable answer. Satisfaction spread across Kishiar's face.

"Indeed, my assistant is smart. It's fortunate that not everyone is as quick-witted as you."

Yuder had seen in his previous life how sensitive the court mages were to power. It was only natural since those who wanted to gain power rather than improving their magic skills often became court mages.

On the surface, they professed loyalty to the emperor alone, but behind the scenes, they colluded with various nobles and engaged in dirty dealings.

What the current emperor was thinking, one couldn't be sure, but Kishiar certainly couldn't trust them fully. Considering the risk of information leaking, it was much safer to win over a single archmage obsessed with magic research rather than entrust the palace mages. This likely played a part in his easy acceptance of Yuder's suggestion.

"Fine. Let's go down then. Let's see what kind of talent the Pearl Tower has sent us."

Kishiar rose from his seat. Yuder thought he would head straight out of the quarters, but surprisingly, he approached Yuder and peered closely at his face.

"...Commander?"

Yuder instinctively tensed and cautiously questioned.

"You seem to have had no time to wash your face after training. You're a mess."

He took out a handkerchief and wiped Yuder's cheeks and forehead. The fragrance emanating from the handkerchief made his back stiffen for a moment.

Yuder recognized Kishiar's slightly sharp body scent. It had been a faded memory in his mind for a long time. The sudden reality of the scent unsettled him.

"Please... stop."

"We're almost done anyway."

He turned his face to evade, but it was in vain. Kishiar, who followed him till the end and wiped up to his nose, put the handkerchief back in his pocket. His nonchalant behavior left Yuder speechless.

"You could just tell me to wash up. Why do this?"

"What's wrong with being kind?"

"Why are you putting the handkerchief back? It's dirty, you should leave it."

"Don't be so sensitive. I'm fine."

Kishiar laughed merrily and patted Yuder's shoulder. If anyone should act sensitively, it should be the noble Kishiar, not the commoner Yuder. Yuder deeply regretted not washing his face earlier.

"You must have had a long journey. Thank you for coming."

Kishiar, who had descended to where the mages were with Yuder, cheerfully greeted first.

"Are you His Excellency, Duke Peletta?"

"Yes, indeed. However, here, my position as the commander of the Cavalry takes precedence, so please call me that."

Finally seeing Duke Peletta in person, Alik was stunned once by his beauty, as if witnessing the incarnation of the Sun God, and twice by his seemingly snaky smile.

'I heard he was a spendthrift, unintelligent, and impulsive, but what's with these rumors?'

Casually glancing to the side, he noticed no change in Thais's expression.

'Master is something. If you knew the rumors were wrong, you could have told me earlier!'

Turning

Chapter 65

While Alik grumbled internally, Kishiar invited the old mage and his apprentice to take a seat. Yuder stood behind Kishiar, an assistant in his stead. Although Yuder's face was cleaner than before, his attire was still unkempt, yet Kishiar seemed unconcerned with his subordinate's appearance.

Did this signify the grandeur of the Duke, or was it a silent warning to Thais and Alik, stating that they didn't even need to show the slightest courtesy? Alik's mind raced.

It was Thais who spoke first.

"I am grateful, sir, that you personally greet an old man who came uninvited. I am Thais Yulman, a mage from the Pearl Tower. This is my unruly apprentice, Alik Pelgin."

"I am Alik Pelgin, a mage from the Pearl Tower."

After acknowledging the greetings of the two mages, Kishiar gracefully raised his hand towards Yuder.

"This is Yuder Aile, my assistant. I've heard that my assistant had an encounter with both of you at the palace previously. Seeing as we meet again today, it seems like there must be a deep connection."

In reality, Kishiar had been secretly observing while in disguise, but the two mages didn't know that.

"Indeed, sir. If it weren't for Sir Aile, I wouldn't have been able to make it here today. I didn't have the opportunity to express my gratitude earlier. Thank you, Sir Aile."

"I just did what I had to."

Alik was quite surprised by the identity of Yuder, something he couldn't have guessed just by appearances. A young man held a position usually occupied by those with much more experience, and he'd already received a last name. There was indeed justification for his confidence, even in front of nobles.

'Well, considering he knocked out that Knight named Kiolle at once, he's no ordinary skilled person. It's rare to see someone not from the Pearl Tower who can use attribute magic so quickly and simply. Are there many people of that level of skill here? Or is Yuder Aile extraordinary?'

Alik examined Yuder's pale face. The inscrutable cold expression and shadow-draped eyes were a bit intimidating, but considering he'd helped save him and his master, Alik felt a sense of goodwill.

"Thais Yulman. I've heard your name before. You are a renowned elder within the Pearl Tower, currently focused on research. May I ask why you've come here, concealing your name and identity?"

"If you know me, haven't you already guessed my purpose?"

Thais stroked his long beard with a calm smile.

"I heard that you managed to acquire something that no one else could for the past two years. As a researcher of magic, how could I resist coming when I heard the news? I am here to see it."

"So such rumors have spread. Don't you think they are rather exaggerated? I wonder who could have spread such a story all the way to the Pearl Tower."

"Does it matter what it is? The fame of you and the Cavalry has spread throughout the continent. Naturally, everyone will find out. Isn't there a saying that a tongue is the hardest weapon to control in the world?"

Thais Yulman's rhetoric was very cunning. While he didn't hide his eagerness to investigate the Red Stone, he brushed off the issue of how he got the information as if it wasn't important.

A trace of chilliness spread over Kishiard's smiling face, as if he had noticed something.

"His Majesty the Emperor values sincerity above all else when he embarks on a significant task. I do not think it was such a good choice to come here, escaping his sight."

"Commander, isn't it true that, even if everything else was exaggerated, the Red Stone indeed disappeared from its original place? At first, I intended to meet His Majesty the Emperor. However, when I found out that he has long stopped seeing even the envoys from foreign nations, I thought it better to grasp at straws than to wait aimlessly. Wouldn't anyone think the same?"

As Kishiar remained silent at his words, Thais seemed to gain strength and continued speaking honestly.

"I do not mean to boast, but I have devoted myself single-mindedly and earned the title of an elder. No one on this continent can investigate the Red Stone as thoroughly as I can. All this old man desires is the chance to see it even once and research what is hidden inside it. Please do not doubt this. Who sent me here is not important to me. If necessary, I will even write a vow."

"..."

"Commander, isn't it true that you also need someone to thoroughly investigate the stone? Isn't that why we are face-to-face like this?"

'He had confidence from the beginning.'

Yuder quietly speculated as he watched Thais.

'Thais Yulman must have known that the Emperor and Kishiar wouldn't completely trust the court mages, so he came running. He believed that someone would eventually need to investigate, and that his skills were the best, so he came with such confidence.'

If the Emperor and Kishiar really wanted to possess the stone, the best course of action would be to accept Thais's proposal. The old mage offered quite a tempting proposal: he would overlook everything else if only they entrusted him with the research. Now, it was time to see how Kishiar would respond.

"Well, in fact, His Majesty the Emperor once said that it would be better to destroy the stone right away rather than letting the peace of the entire continent shake due to it. And as we all know, we don't necessarily need to investigate in order to destroy."

"Are you saying... it was retrieved for destruction?"

Thais's expression subtly changed for a moment.

"Haha. I didn't say for sure whether it has been retrieved or not. But if needed, it could be so."

Various thoughts seemed to flicker in the old magician's head.

Was Kishiar's certainty a sign that the Emperor's side had already completed some investigation of the stone? Did they conclude that the power within the stone was, in fact, trivial? Or was this merely to shake Thais Yulman?

Thais Yulman scrutinized Kishiar's face meticulously. He could not read any real intentions from his languid smile. However, when he spoke of destruction if necessary, it felt undeniably sincere.

'The Empire wouldn't want change... They'd probably think it better to destroy it unless they deem it a power worth risking. It's a plausible story.'

But even if the stone held no particular power, Thais Yulman desired to see it. The Pearl Tower had ordered him to bring the stone, but Thais wanted to monopolize this golden research opportunity, if possible.

Thinking that his opponent would be the one regretting, he had mustered up courage, but now it seemed he was the one feeling regretful.

Thais Yulman hesitated, then opened his mouth.

"The House of the Four Dukes... I believe they might have a better solution than destruction."

It was a veiled hint. It implied that among the four ducal houses, someone had leaked information about the Red Stone to the Pearl Tower and Thais Yulman.

'Or perhaps, it was all of them.'

While Yuder finally watched Thais Yulman play his cards, Kishiar lightly tapped his crossed knee with his finger.

"A better solution, huh? Do you think so too?"

It was a short question, as if asking him to choose between the emperor and the four ducal houses. However, Yulman grasped another implication within it.

A smile spread across his face after a moment.

"Oh dear. I am merely an old mage. Did I not tell you I have no interest in such important matters?"

Kishiar's tapping finger halted on his knee.

"That's a pity. I hoped to benefit from the wisdom of a wise elder."

After saying this, he turned to Yuder and gave him a slightly different smile than before.

"Yuder, please prepare guest quarters for these two."

"Understood. Should I request the oath from Sir Nathan?"

'You're always so quick to catch on.' Pleased, Kishiar lightly tapped Yuder's gloved hand before rising from his seat.

"Heavens... I have no idea what just happened. Would you believe me if I said the conversation between the Duke and Master was harder to understand than an introductory magic textbook? I still have chills."

Entering the guest room Yuder had prepared, Alik shivered and threw himself onto the bed. He didn't want to imagine the hidden blades that must have been exchanged in the conversation that had just taken place.

All he remembered was signing the oath with a trembling hand under the terrifying smile of Duke Peletta, and Yuder kindly offering to transfer their luggage from the palace.

"Well, at least we've found our destination. Isn't that good enough?"

"What's good about it? Why were the rumors about Duke Peletta like that until now?"

Alik shuddered as he remembered Kishiar. The Duke's smile when he casually questioned Thais at the end had seemed more terrifying than his master's angry face.

"A young, unripe beast hiding its claws is not a rare event in history. As long as we don't provoke it, it will leave us alone. We only need to finish examining the Red Stone, so be careful with your words until then, Alik."

"Do we have to go through all this just for research....."

"If you don't like it, you can go back to the tower."

"Ah, damn it..."

Alik sighed heavily, looking out the window of the guest room.

'Does the Red Stone really exist here? It's unbelievable.'

Turning

Chapter 66

What Alik saw in the Cavalry quarters was utterly different from what he had imagined before arriving. Having heard they were located within the Imperial Knight's territory, he had naturally assumed they were simply using an old, hastily patched-up building. But who could have known that it was instead a place constructed anew from the ground up?

The expensive materials that adorned the solidly constructed building hinted at how grand the expectations and aspirations of its creator must have been.

'The people working in the palace used to chatter that Duke Peletta just made the Cavalry unit for fun after awakening... How could this place possibly have been made for amusement? They can only speak so carelessly because they've never been here!'

If there were a few more people here with skills as extraordinary as Yuder Aile's, they would become a formidable force that no one could dismiss. What on earth was a duke, unable to vie for the imperial throne, doing forming such an ambitious power under the tacit approval of the emperor?

The Orr Empire was a nation famed for its lack of change over a long period of time. Nobody could break the order they had established, neither from within nor without.

However, Alik sighed, contemplating that he and his master might have stepped into this dangerous time where the empire was finally facing the moment of radical change.

There was one day left until the end of the seven-day vacation period.

Because he had told Gakane and Kanna to take the day off, it could be considered a true day of rest. Early in the morning, Yuder, to avoid the members who were gradually returning, quietly headed out from the Imperial Knight's territory.

It had been a long time since he had walked the streets in normal clothes, having shed his uniform. Numerous people brushed past Yuder as he meandered through the old, unchanged streets, sparking old memories.

Originally, it was said that common people didn't live within the 7th Wall district. However, as time passed, many people snuck in, settling down, and now it had transformed into a commonplace scenery.

Unlike the other districts where the majority of the buildings were built in balance as if measured, just a little way off the main street in the 7th Wall district, things quickly turned labyrinthine. This was due to the influx of those inhabitants.

Yuder navigated the dizzying streets adeptly and moved forward without any hesitation. As time went by, his surroundings became progressively grimmer and darker. The stench that was strong enough to rot one's nose began to waft from between the shadows of the tightly packed buildings.

Eyes filled with anticipation of possibly picking the pockets of naive foreigners who lost their way in the darkness that stretched out like a spider's long legs trailed after him from the alleys. Of course, they quickly gave up when they realized that the new visitor was quite familiar with this slum.

The place where Yuder stopped was in front of a very small pharmacy tucked away in an old alley. It was extremely hard for first-time visitors to identify the place. The shop itself looked precariously close to collapsing, and the sign was so worn out that it was almost impossible to read the words on it.

However, as Yuder was already aware of what the place was, he did not hesitate and walked right in.

"Get out. Not open for business today."

A voice as dreadful as a hellish shriek barked from inside the opened door, the harsh tone hardly befitting for a potential customer.

Yuder paid no attention to the clutter that filled the room so densely that neither the walls nor the ceiling could be seen. Instead, his gaze was drawn to the two feet propped up nonchalantly on the counter.

"What are you doing, deaf? I told you we're not doing business! Get out!"

"I didn't come to buy medicine."

"..."

The two casually swaying feet stopped in their tracks at that moment. After a while, someone raised their reclining body and leaned over the counter to reveal their face. It was hard to believe that a man with such an attractive appearance had been lying in this disorganized and filthy space.

"What? Who are you?"

Yuder recalled the past as he looked at the man's ash-gray hair and deeply furrowed brow. He felt a strange emotion upon seeing that he looked no different from the last time he had seen him in his previous life.

"I came because there's something I want to hear."

"...Do you know me? Who are you to come all of a sudden and speak informally and give orders?"

"The Guardian of Luma's Seven Walls, Enon."

Yuder's voice was calm. However, the man's expression changed significantly upon hearing his words.

"...What did you just say?"

"The Guardian of Luma's Seven Walls...."

"Wait. Wait a minute, wait a minute."

The man, who quickly leaped out from behind the counter, covered Yuder's mouth. His eyes were filled with curiosity, surprise, and wariness.

"Who are you? How do you know? Who told you? Strange... I definitely don't recognize your face?"

'It was none other than yourself from your previous life.'

Yuder regretted a bit that he couldn't say that, pointing to the hand that was covering his mouth. The meaning was that if he kept covering it like this, he wouldn't be able to answer even if he tried.

Although Enon's expression was still full of skepticism, he finally removed his hand.

Instead of answering his question, Yuder quietly lifted the corner of his mouth.

"I can't tell you who told me right now. But I swear it's not information I obtained unfairly. As far as I know, you have to cooperate with anyone who mentions your name. Isn't that right?"

The look in Enon's eyes changed completely to one of utter astonishment.

"How... how do you know that too? No matter how I think about it, I don't know someone like you. How on earth did this happen? Is there something wrong with my head?"

Enon might not have known Yuder, but Yuder knew him. He was the one who helped Yuder, who had been seriously injured while carrying out a secret mission for the Emperor in his previous life and was hiding briefly near the slums.

He was coarse in his speech, but he was more compassionate and kind than he appeared. He knew so much that it was almost mysterious, and he often shared information deeper than most information guilds without hesitation. At that time, he claimed it was because he had heard so much from living in the slums for a long time.

Several years passed in this way, and when a disaster spread across the world and Yuder started chasing the signs of something strange, Enon suddenly disappeared.

Before disappearing, he once mentioned that he thought he needed to leave the capital and find out something. Yuder found the last letter he left in the medicine shop months after he had a hunch about something.

The letter revealed that he was not merely an ordinary person, but a Guardian who had made a pact with the Archmage Luma long ago to protect the seven walls of the capital. It also contained a few more pieces of information related to him.

"Believe in my words or not, that's your choice. But if we meet again and I do not remember you, mention the name 'Enon,' Luma's Guardian. Then I will certainly help you again. I wish you luck on your journey, Yudrain."

Enon sometimes audaciously called himself 'elder brother' and meddled with Yuder. Even though Yuder had never once called him 'elder brother,' his disappearance was included in the fleeting regrets that swept past him just before his death.

"Your head is perfectly fine. And my name is Yuder Aile. Remember it; we'll be seeing a lot of each other."

Yuder introduced himself anew, carrying memories from their brief relationship in his past life.

"Even hearing the name, I still don't recognize it...? And why should I see you frequently?"

Enon frowned and tilted his head.

"Because you're the only person who can help me now."

Yuder casually pulled over a chair that was left around and sat down, ignoring Enon's gaping mouth at his nonchalant attitude.

Enon had the uncanny ability to discern whether a person was lying or not. Thus, from this point on, he needed to speak with the utmost honesty.

"Currently, I need information about those who have held the title of Duke in the past while possessing the castle of La Orr. Even if it's small, if you have any knowledge, please share it. Especially about Kishiar La Orr, who became a Duke under the same conditions as now."

"...Why are you already talking as if I've agreed to help you? Are you planning some sort of rebellion? If that's the case, I absolutely won't assist you."

"No, it's not. The information you give me will only be known to me, and I won't use it anywhere."

In his past life, Yuder did not highly trust the information Enon shared because he thought it was leaked from some back alley. But this time it was different. Yuder decided to trust Enon more than the information guilds he had used and been betrayed by multiple times in the past.

"It's very important to me. I can't ask anywhere else. Please."

At Yuder's words, Enon's eyes twitched. He let out a deep sigh and slouched, then suddenly jumped up and began pacing around the narrow shop.

"This is crazy."

"..."

"You understand how tricky it is to deal with information related to the imperial family's history?"

"I do. That's why I'm asking you."

"I thought my luck seemed a bit off this morning. So this was it, meeting a crazy guy like you."

He said this, then continued pacing the shop for a while. Eventually, he knocked over one of the piles of random stuff he had collected, snapped in frustration, and finally stopped.

"...If things were as usual, I would have kicked you out. But I'll help you, just this once. You did come here in my name."

Yuder immediately tried to express his gratitude, but Enon cut him off.

"But the information you're asking for is too dangerous and covers a wide range. Anything related to the imperial family takes a backseat for me, so it'll take some time to verify."

"How long?"

"At least three days."

"Understood."

Yuder immediately nodded and stood up from his seat. At this, Enon's expression became strange again.

Turning

Chapter 67

"Leaving so soon?"

"I told you. I can't afford to stay out too long."

His vacation time hadn't yet ended, but staying outside unnecessarily for too long might pique the curiosity of his colleagues or Kishiar. He had thought of some excuses beforehand, but they couldn't serve as perfect justifications.

"I'll be back in three days."

Yuder left the old drugstore, ignoring Enon's questioning gaze. However, he failed to visit the place again three days later as he had said.

An unexpected event occurred two days later.

"He hasn't returned yet?"

Yuder was standing behind Kishiar, listening to the report of his members. He was supposed to implement a new training plan he had devised from yesterday. However, there were a few members who had not yet returned despite the end of their vacation, so he had postponed it for a day. The problem was that one of the non-returnees hadn't sent any news until this very moment.

Kishiar called in a few who were close to the member who hadn't returned and listened to the stories related to him. The non-returnee's name was 'Devran Hartude', an ordinary member who had never caused any problems before.

All the members who were close to Devran insisted that there was no reason for him to intentionally not return.

"Devran has told us many times how happy he is to have passed the Cavalry test. He isn't the type to not return without any reason or even send news. There must be something wrong."

One of the members who used to share a room with Devran clenched his lips and declared so. Kishiar, looking around at the faces of the members who all agreed with the same sentiment, continued his inquiry.

"Did he say anything about his hometown, where he was headed?"

"He mentioned going to see his family. Nothing else comes to mind."

"I'm the same."

Most gave the same answer. However, one hesitated for a moment, lost in thought. Kishiar immediately pointed to him with his fingertip.

"Jol, do you remember anything?"

"Well... It's not something he mentioned this time, but something he said before... It just came to my mind. I don't know if I should mention it..."

"You can say whatever it is."

Encouraged by Kishiar's response, Jol, a member of the Cavalry, overcame his hesitation and began to speak.

"After joining the troop, Devran and I once discussed our backgrounds and hometowns. He said at the time that he wanted to bring his family and relatives he had left in his hometown here as soon as possible."

"Doesn't every commoner say that?"

Another member standing next to Jol questioned with surprise.

"Right. But then, Devran said he was worried that the lord might not allow the transfer of residence. When I asked why, he mentioned his younger sibling and suddenly looked pale, closing his mouth saying that he had said something unnecessary. It seemed like there was something going on."

Devran's hometown was a small rural village. He wasn't sure about the life there, but if his hometown was a good place for commoners to live, he wouldn't have wished to bring his family to the capital.

Yet, for a noble who valued their dignity above all else, refusing the request of a promising Cavalry member from their own territory was unthinkable. It was a place personally established by the Emperor's younger brother, Duke Peletta, and if handled well, it could forge connections with him. How could the mere relocation requests of a few commoners possibly matter?

Still, if Devran had been concerned about his request being denied, it likely meant he didn't think highly of the lord ruling his homeland.

"Because of a sibling..."

Kishiar muttered under his breath, rubbing his chin thoughtfully as he considered the words he'd just heard.

"Firstly, we should send a message to the lord of Devran's homeland, asking about the situation, and send someone to investigate. What do you think, assistant?"

"In the event something has happened to Devran, it might be too late by the time we receive a response. How about sending a message and dispatching a person at the same time?"

"That sounds better."

At Yuder's reply, Kishiar nodded and, as if something had just come to mind, smiled subtly.

"Speaking of which, Yuder, why don't you take responsibility and handle this?"

"...Are you suggesting me?"

"Who else would be better suited than you, the assistant with the greatest skills among the 330 members?"

Kishiar raised his eyebrows slightly as he asked this question, and all the members present nodded in agreement. How could the Commander himself get involved over something as minor as a member who hadn't returned from vacation? It seemed appropriate for an assistant like Yuder to handle it.

Yuder, who had thought he wouldn't be sent because there were only about three weeks left until the deadline for investigating the Red Stone, was slightly taken aback. Still, he quickly composed himself.

'Well, it's most likely he's simply been delayed on his way back. It makes sense to send someone who can handle this quickly.'

Furthermore, there was a high possibility that Kishiar saw this as a suitable opportunity to observe Yuder's abilities. In his previous life, he had created sudden circumstances where multiple things had to be handled simultaneously to see how Yuder coped. Compared to those instances, this situation was hardly burdensome.

"Leave today without delay. I will leave the number of people you need to your discretion, so choose freely from our ranks."

"I will follow your command."

Yuder swallowed a sigh that he didn't let the others hear. This would affect the training schedule he had planned for the members and the promise he had with Enon, but there was nothing he could do about it.

'Devran Hartude... I need to find out what kind of guy he was before I select who will accompany me.'

Yuder's memories of Devran were extremely vague. All he knew was that he didn't seem to have been in the cavalry for long in his previous life. Therefore, he decided to meet with Steiber, Sul's deputy commander, to hear information about Devran.

"Oh, Yuder, so you're going to look for Devran? If you're the one going, I'm sure it'll be resolved well... That's really fortunate."

Steiber, with his kind face, was very pleased to hear that Yuder had taken on the task of finding Devran. He provided all the information he knew without holding back.

"Devran is from Hartan in the east. His ability is to summon fire, which is quite powerful, but he has had difficulty controlling it."

He praised Devran's character as good-hearted, fiery like a power. He added, worried that this personality might have gotten him swept up in some unfortunate incident on his return.

"Steiber. What do you think about the possibility that Devran didn't come back on purpose?"

"There's no way. He was never late for training even once. If something happened back home and he thought he wouldn't be able to return on time, he would have contacted the Cavalry in advance."

Steiber's answer was firm. Yuder nodded and committed the information he'd given to memory.

Those who had been close to Devran, like Steiber, all insisted that there was no way he wouldn't have returned without a reason. It was clear that he had been more than content with his life in the Cavalry, his passion overflowing.

After gathering this information, Yuder decided to select members to join him in searching for Devran.

'The requirements: someone with good physical strength and agility to travel quickly. Someone with skills that would aid in the search. Someone who would follow my orders without wasting time. And... finally, someone familiar with the geography and customs of Hartan or the eastern region.'

The person with the most useful skills for the search was Kanna, but Yuder had decided against bringing her. He wanted her to focus on her training while he was away.

After considering the remaining criteria, he found few suitable candidates. After much thought, Yuder wrote the names of his selected members on a piece of paper to report to Kishiar.

"Gakane Bolunwald. Jimmy Ocker. Hm. Are those two really enough?"

"Yes."

Kishiar, who received the paper from Yuder, could not hide his surprise at the only two names written on it. However, Yuder had no intention of adding more people.

Gakane was more familiar with Yuder's personality and style than anyone, and his shadow clone was perfect for moving and communicating without attracting the attention of others. As for Jimmy Ocker, despite being a young boy, his knowledge of the local geography and customs, being from the East, would be a great help while also not drawing suspicion.

"Gakane, maybe. But Jimmy Ocker is still a kid, isn't he?"

"He may be young, but isn't it you, the commander, who saw him as a capable member of the squad? From what I've observed of Jimmy so far, I judge that he can handle a mission of this magnitude."

If the mission involved killing or something that wasn't good for emotional education, Yuder would have excluded Jimmy. But this mission's purpose was a search. During their training, Yuder had witnessed firsthand just how talented an Awakener Jimmy was.

Jimmy knew the importance of the opportunity given to him. The boy was always mature, had never whined about missing his parents even during training that would make adults struggle.

Considering that noble boys who entered the Imperial Knights at a young age often gave up on the path despite receiving countless privileges, Jimmy's qualities stood out.

"I assume both have agreed to accompany you on the mission."

"Of course."

Just before reporting to Kishiar, Yuder called Gakane and Jimmy to explain the mission and ask if they were willing to go with him. Gakane accepted readily, and Jimmy, overwhelmed with excitement, couldn't hide his youthful emotion as he vowed to be of help.

"Alright. Then I'll trust and leave it to you."

Kishiar nodded and folded the paper again.

Turning

Chapter 68

"I have just sent a letter to Lord of Hartan regarding Devran's whereabouts. If there are any changes once I receive a response, I will send you a carrier pigeon. You should also take one with you, in case something unexpected occurs and you need to contact me."

"I understand."

"Oh, and wait a moment."

Yuder, who had turned to leave, halted and looked back. Kishiar was staring thoughtfully at a piece of parchment.

"Do you have further instructions?"

"Yuder, you are yet to manifest your second gender, correct?"

"...Yes, that's correct."

Yuder was momentarily taken aback at the unexpected question about the second gender that sprung from Kishiar's lips.

"That Gakane Bolunwald accompanying you is an Alpha Awakener, am I correct?"

"That's what I've heard."

What on earth was Kishiar La Orr trying to say? Unable to control his facial expression due to the tension, it hardened unknowingly.

"There might be one more thing you should be mindful of. It could be a misunderstanding, but we've received a report that there seem to be signs of a second gender manifesting in Jimmy Ocker."

"You mean, Jimmy...?"

"I'm not certain. There's still a lot unknown about the signs of second gender manifesting. Even if manifesting signs appear, it doesn't necessarily mean his second gender will manifest immediately."

"Ah... I see."

Yuder nodded feebly, feeling his anxiety and alertness cool down at once. He felt foolish for having been so tensed up.

"Even if there are signs, it's just a slight fever. It doesn't seem likely that the kid will manifest, but it won't hurt to be cautious."

"I understand."

He wondered whether it would be better not to take Jimmy with him after all, but hesitated as he remembered the boy's extremely happy face. Yuder decided that he would pay more attention to Jimmy.

'After all, whether it's Gakane or Jimmy, it's the same thing for me to handle.'

While he was thinking that Gakane would feel quite wronged if he knew, Kishiar studied Yuder's face and continued.

"So far, there have been no cases of a second gender manifesting within the division, but after receiving that report, I felt that it was wise to prepare related regulations in advance, as you suggested."

Yuder blinked, feeling a strange sense of unfamiliarity.

"...Ah, yes."

"All the regulations related to the Cavalry should be finalized soon, so check them when you return. Once they're announced, they'll be hard to change."

"I understand."

"Once the regulations are in place, that will be the start of something new. I plan to propose a law related to Awakeners in the Imperial Law and support related research. If we hide the disadvantages in advance and show the benefits, it'll make things easier in the future. You should brace yourself for becoming busier."

In his previous life, Yuder had gone through a lot of trouble to push through regulations and laws related to the second gender, against the opposition of greedy nobles.

Back then, there were hardly any scholars conducting proper research on the abilities and physical changes of the Awakeners, and it was nearly impossible for the leader of the Cavalry, who came from a commoner background, to correct misconceptions and prejudice alone.

A single Kishiar presence was all it took to swiftly shift everything around him, as he held his position as commander. Of course, starting the Cavalry immediately had been advantageous, but if Kishiar hadn't envisioned a future beyond Yuder's proposal, things would not have moved so rapidly.

He couldn't change what had already happened, but what if he could have done this earlier?

With a deep conviction that his latest decision hadn't been mistaken, Yuder respectfully bowed his head.

Afterwards, Yuder immediately left the cavalry, taking Gakane and Jimmy with him. This time, without the assistance of the Pearl Tower mages like before, they had to ride ordinary horses.

"We're planning to make the journey as quickly as possible, so rest time will be minimal, and we won't be looking for lodgings at night. We'll also need to change horses multiple times, so follow along well."

"Understood."

"Don't worry about me. I've ridden here on my own when I came to take the Cavalry test."

Jimmy answered confidently, a determined expression on his face.

"On your own? Impressive. Did you run into any trouble?"

"There was a thief who followed me trying to steal my money. Of course, once I split a rock with my sword, he vanished in terror."

Jimmy chuckled, fondling the small sword at his waist in response to Gakane's question. They all currently carried training swords since Kishiar was in the process of preparing individual weapons for each member. But even with these, they were competent enough to show their skills, and no one complained.

'He doesn't look feverish...'

Yuder watched Jimmy happily riding his horse, recalling the statement about him possibly manifesting his second gender. The most common physical change before the second gender manifested was a fever lasting several days.

Of course, it differed for each person. Some had different symptoms, others had no precursor symptoms at all and manifested the second gender suddenly. Yuder had been the latter.

'I wasn't much different at the time of my manifesting... If it's the same as before, he doesn't have much time left.'

The sudden manifesting without any prior symptoms had drastically altered his life. This time, he planned to prepare as much as possible to avoid going through the same ordeal.

"Gakane. Keep a close eye on Jimmy during the journey."

While Jimmy was a little ahead, Yuder moved closer to Gakane, whispering in a low voice as they rode side by side.

"Huh? Something happened?"

"The Commander mentioned that the boy is showing some symptoms of second gender manifestation. I might not be able to discern it because I'm a beginner, but you'd likely be better at it."

"Oh, really? The commander said that?"

Gakane's eyes widened as he looked at Jimmy's back.

"I don't sense anything yet... But okay, I'll keep an eye on him."

"If you sense something, let me know immediately."

A small cage, no bigger than his palm, hung beside Yuder's saddle. Inside, a pigeon clung tightly to a small perch, seemingly unperturbed by the rocking motion. This was Yuder's means of communication.

Considering that even Gakane didn't sense anything, the chance of Jimmy's manifestation seemed exceptionally low, but one never knew.

If Jimmy were to manifest as an Alpha, it wouldn't be a concern. But if he manifested as an Omega, there was a chance that Gakane, being an Alpha, could be affected.

'Well... I will just have to keep a closer eye to ensure that doesn't happen.'

Even if such an event occurred, it was enough to isolate it.

While it might have been different if it was Kishiar, who was concealing an immense power that could not even be fully comprehended, Yuder was confident that he could easily isolate individuals of Gakane and Jimmy's caliber alone.

'In swordsmanship, awakener power, and divine power... Maybe it's a blessing that there aren't two of these monstrous individuals who may be hiding something else.'

Even knowing Kishiar's power to some extent, Yuder could not guess where the limit of his abilities lay.

Yuder shook his head, casting away the unnecessary thoughts that had come to him.

'Let's focus on what's right in front of us.'

They had ridden horses relentlessly throughout the day. Whenever a horse was exhausted, they quickly borrowed a replacement from a nearby village.

The pass that Kishiar provided before their departure had been incredibly useful. They were treated like messengers carrying the emperor's decree, allowing them to easily borrow horses from any village, whether from the local guards or the steeds raised by the lords.

The pace would have been unbearable for an ordinary person, but it was lighter than the regular training the Awakeners like them received. Even Jimmy did not show any signs of fatigue.

"Jimmy. Your hometown is near Devran's, right? How close is it exactly?"

While riding, Gakane asked Jimmy various questions related to the Eastern region. Jimmy's parents owned a quite well-known shop in the Eastern region, and so he had picked up a lot of useful information.

"It shouldn't take more than a few hours? Quite a few people used to come to the village where I lived from Hartan to shop."

Jimmy disparaged Hartan as a very small, insignificant village. It barely had any shops, and the market did not flourish, so the inhabitants had to go to other villages to buy anything.

"I heard the lord there is quite old. He doesn't take much interest in his subjects and has a married daughter and two sons, if I remember correctly."

"Who's next in line for the lordship once the current lord passes away?"

"The eldest will definitely inherit it. Since the eldest daughter is married, perhaps she will come and take over?"

"The atmosphere is quite different from the South."

Gakane, who was from the South, murmured thoughtfully.

"Where I come from, the youngest inherits everything the parents owned until the end, be it titles or anything else."

"Wow, that's even more strange. Then what happens to the older siblings?"

"The older ones receive more support while growing up and often establish themselves independently. But what does the youngest have except for the parents? So isn't it right for the elder siblings to yield?"

At Gakane's words, Jimmy opened his mouth and tilted his head.

"Uh... when you put it that way, it does seem to make sense?"

"Haha. Come visit sometime. You'll be surprised."

"I'll do that."

Watching the two who looked like close brothers, Yuder surveyed the surroundings. As they had chosen the fastest route, they had strayed from the safe trade route, making the surroundings extremely dark and eerily quiet. However, Jimmy was the one who had told them this was the quickest way.

'Judging from the well-trodden ground and the surrounding conditions, this seems to be a frequently used path. But it's a bit odd that it's so deserted. It feels as if something's about to jump out...'

"Halt, you scoundrels!"

Turning

Chapter 69

"Halt, you scoundrels!"

Just at that moment, a few people stepped out to block the path as if they'd read Yuder's thoughts, shouting out in defiance.

"How dare you tread on the path we linger! You should be ready to pay the toll."

"Ah, right. It's them. The ones I encountered when I came for the Cavalry test."

Jimmy, who had been chattering with Gakane, looked at their faces and whispered lightly.

"It seems there is no change even after some time."

His tone was as if he was not dealing with bandits, but greeting familiar faces from a long lost home town. The bandits, thinking it odd that the three seated calmly on their horses were not startled, lit their torches and approached.

"What, did these kids freeze in fear? Why aren't they saying anything..."

One of the bandits with a rough face scarred from knife wounds approached and, seeing Jimmy on his horse, suddenly closed his mouth.

"What's up, why'd you stop talking? As I was saying about the toll..."

Another bandit who followed suit stopped mid-sentence as well.

"What's the matter? What's wrong... You, you are!"

"Hello. You're still here, I see."

Jimmy rubbed his nose as he greeted them from atop his horse. Of course, the recipients of the greeting did not appreciate his cheerful salutation.

"Bloody hell. It's the kid who said he was going to take some kind of test last time!"

"You, you... don't tell me you failed? Is that why you came back? Dammit!"

"No, I passed, of course. I have two other companions here with me besides myself."

Jimmy pointed at Yuder and Gakane with a smile. Only then did the bandits seem to realize the existence of the other two, their eyes darting in shock and fear.

"Don't tell me, those two are also... like you, cutting rocks with their swords...?"

"Ah. They are far more impressive than I am. How can you compare them to me, who is merely 12 years old?"

"Damn it, retreat. Retreat! Run!"

Just as Jimmy finished speaking, one of the bandits closest to them started running, waving his hands wildly. The other bandits, as if they had been waiting for such an order, scampered away without even looking back.

A sudden wind picked up on the dark mountain path, and the torch held by one of the bandits was hastily extinguished. The remaining bandits, who were further away, seemed to notice something was up and promptly vanished into the shadows.

"They fled already, and we didn't even do anything yet. What should we do?"

Jimmy murmured, looking worried as he watched their swift departure.

"Indeed. Hmm. Should we chase them?"

Gakane also turned to Yuder, a hint of uncertainty in his eyes. Normally, they would have given chase, but they were currently on an urgent mission to find Devran Hartude.

"What do you think, Yuder?"

"Summon the shadow clone to chase. Block the path and catch as many as possible."

"Got it."

At Yuder's order, the shadow clone of Gakane sprung forth from under his horse, darting in the direction the bandits had fled at an incredible speed. It moved so fast it was incomparable to a human running.

"Jimmy. Since when have bandits been lurking around here?"

As Gakane's shadow clone was carrying out its task, Yuder, with an impassive face, asked Jimmy. Lost in thought, Jimmy frowned slightly.

"Hmm. I'm not quite sure. In fact, there were many people who used to take this path until last year. But when I told my parents that I would be going alone to take the Cavalry test, they absolutely forbade me from going this way. They said it was dangerous because bandits had claimed the route and were demanding a toll. But it's much quicker than any other way, so... hehe."

"So, you're saying they've been here for at least a year."

"Why? Is that a significant point?"

Gakane, manipulating his shadow, tilted his head and turned his gaze towards Yuder. Thanks to the grueling training he had been doing, he was now able to control his shadow with a fair amount of ease. Yuder opened his mouth quietly, directing his words at both Gakane and Jimmy.

"Have you two not noticed it yet?"

"Noticed what?"

"I don't understand what you're saying."

"There're Awakeners among those bandits."

"...What? Oh no."

The moment Gakane opened his mouth in surprise, a thud and a scream echoed from afar. It seemed he had accidentally used his shadow control too forcefully.

"Awakeners? Then why did they run away after seeing us? They wouldn't have needed to. No, more importantly, Yuder, how did you know that?"

"Torchlight. Wind. Darkness."

"Huh?"

"Ah, I see. I understand now!"

At Yuder's enigmatic words, Jimmy immediately brightened and exclaimed.

"They approached us with a torch, even though they hadn't been carrying one from the beginning. And when they ran away, the wind suddenly blew! And there's no moon or stars visible in the sky!"

They were all correct. Only then did Gakane look up at the sky, surprised at the pitch-black darkness where neither moon nor stars could be seen.

"I didn't realize. How did this happen? Despite the sky being so dark, I didn't find it strange because I could see my surroundings so clearly."

Even this acceptance of the situation could be due to someone's ability. Yuder, swallowing his final answer, watched as Gakane's shadow clone handled three bandits who were struggling in the shadow's grasp.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"Damn. I told you I had a bad feeling for the past few days and suggested we stop our operations until the boss returns, didn't I?"

"Shut up, you stinky bastard. Your butt is poking my face!"

"I've been telling you over and over that I've had a bad feeling since the fire the other day!"

"So what does that have to do with us!"

Yuder dismounted his horse to look down at the bandits, who were cursing and struggling. Gakane and Jimmy followed suit.

"Gakane."

"Yeah."

Just hearing his name was enough; Gakane instantly understood Yuder's intention. As soon as the shadow clone released the bandits, the three men collapsed on the ground, screaming in pain.

"Ouch! Ah, my back!"

"Damn it, if you're going to kill us, do it quickly! But you won't be able to get anything from us! Our boss will avenge us!"

As the noisy bandits yelled out, Yuder took a closer look at their faces. In the dim light of the flickering torch, he hadn't noticed it before, but they were all younger than he had initially thought. Only one of them was carrying a knife.

If they were the type to make a living from such activities, they wouldn't have been so poorly armed. Yuder's curiosity about their true identities grew stronger.

"Why are Awakeners here, acting like bandits, extracting tolls?"

"What's it to you? What do you know? Stop blabbing."

Instead of answering, Yuder conjured a flame in his palm. Though small, the threatening flame flared brightly, illuminating their surroundings and drawing everyone's gaze. Fear and alarm flashed across the faces of the three bandits.

"Yuder, you can now summon flames without a sword?"

Unable to hide his amazement, Gakane whispered in his ear.

"With the wind, with the fire... How does your ability keep developing like this?"

The truth was, he had been capable of doing it all along. But had he said that, Gakane would surely have asked why he'd kept it a secret. The only answer Yuder could provide, as before, was...

"...Training with you guys has improved me somewhat."

"Somewhat? You call this somewhat?"

"Hey, can we just talk this out? Yes, we made a mistake in not recognizing who we were dealing with and asking for a toll. But we're not like that, really. We're good guys. We've never killed anyone, we just took a tiny, tiny toll when people passed through! Don't forget you're the one who brought us here when we did nothing!"

Thankfully, one of the bandits raised his voice, preventing Gakane from asking further. Feeling slightly grateful to the bandits, Yuder approached them. As he did, fear heightened on the bandits' faces.

"I just want an answer to my question."

"If... if we answer, you won't kill us, right?"

"Keep your mouth shut when talking to the enemy..."

Yuder extended his other hand and summoned a gust of wind. The bandit who had tried to talk was silenced by the fierce wind that hit his jaw, closing his mouth in an instant.

Witnessing Yuder simultaneously wielding wind and fire, the bandits' eyes widened in terror.

"Let me ask you again. Why are people who wouldn't normally do this sort of thing acting as bandits here? Including Awakeners."

"..."

"Answer me."

"I'll answer that if you let my brothers go."

"Boss!" The bandits turned around in unison and cried out. Yuder looked at a man who had appeared out of nowhere.

He was a remarkably handsome young man, too young to be believed to be a bandit leader. However, the left half of his face was horribly scarred, and his left eye had lost its color, with the pupil dilated, inducing a feeling of fright rather than his inherent handsomeness.

Among the people Yuder had met, this man, with a starkly different impression from the most beautiful man Kishiar, left an unforgettable impact.

"Did you start all this? Leading them into this mess?"

"No. The sequence of events is the reverse."

The man answered surprisingly calmly.

"They first fled from the tyranny of a noble, and then they met me."

Turning

Chapter 70

"Tyranny?"

"Well, isn't that a common tale? So common that it hardly needs explaining."

As the man spoke, the bandits surreptitiously rose from their seats. When Yuder did not bother to stop them, they swiftly ran to hide behind the man's back.

"Boss, how did the mission go?"

"I can't make head nor tail of what's going on. Knights showing up, fires breaking out, and now these characters... something wicked must be afoot."

Knights and fire. Amid their whispered conversation, Yuder picked out these words that tickled his curiosity, causing him to frown.

"What do you mean by 'knights' and 'fire'?"

"You folks, you came here from the capital, didn't you? Looking for someone."

The bandit leader replied with a counter-question. Yuder noticed a strange energy simmering within the man's intact right eye and hesitated momentarily before nodding.

"That's correct. Judging from your words, you seem to know something?"

"I wouldn't say 'know,' exactly. I do recall a man dressed like you all visiting a nearby village a few days ago."

"Devran."

Gakane muttered in a low voice.

"We don't know his name. But three days ago, a sudden fire broke out in that village. By the time it was finally extinguished after half a day, half the village, including the lord's castle, had disappeared."

"Fire?"

Yuder recalled that Devran's power was fire-related. An uneasy premonition swept over him, and a mysterious smile emerged on the bandit leader's face, as if to underline his foreboding.

"The man was captured on the scene as a suspect and was locked up in prison. I went over there briefly to examine the cause of the fire and the situation in the area, and heard stories related to him. Everyone is buzzing that his execution is imminent."

"Could Devran really have...? What should we do?"

Jimmy, at a loss for what to do, turned to Yuder. What he had assumed to be a simple reconnaissance mission had suddenly escalated into an alarming crisis.

Yuder, suppressing his shocked expression better than Gakane and Jimmy, calmed his racing mind. Considering the situation, it seemed highly likely that Devran was the arsonist the bandit leader spoke of. However, nothing could be certain until he verified it personally.

Moreover, the oddly submissive and friendly demeanor of the bandit leader did not sit well with him.

"What about the knights you lot were chatting about?"

"Ah, that's nothing significant. Just yesterday, knights in shining armor passed through here. My brothers, who intended to collect a toll, were completely taken aback at the sight of them, as it was their first encounter with such distinguished guests. However, it turned out that they were not here because of the fire, but for their internal knightly training. They passed through here to a mountain next to the village where the fire broke out."

The bandit leader casually shrugged as he answered.

It was a tradition for renowned knight orders to conduct their training in remote rural areas. It appeared that a portion of them had come here.

"Well, that's all I know. Anything else you want to ask?"

The leader's soft gaze landed on Yuder's face. Yuder felt there was something odd about his eyes but was frustrated as he could not yet pinpoint what it was.

"You and your henchmen, you plan on being half-baked bandits here indefinitely?"

"Half-baked bandits, is that how it appears to you?"

The man retorted in an exaggerated tone, letting out a low chuckle.

"I was actually considering leaving this place soon. I can't live in the empire anymore, with my criminal record and all. There's no other way."

"You make it sound like you had no other choice."

"Because I genuinely had no choice."

A smile surfaced on the leader's face, chilling the observer. It was because his contorted, motionless left side of the face, and his cruel yet beautiful right side composed a disconcerting harmony.

"None of the brothers here believe they've committed a grave enough crime to warrant leaving their hometown. Do you think picking someone's pocket on the road warrants death?"

"What nonsense."

As Gakane sharply interjected, the leader's right eye turned toward him. The gaze was unbelievably soft.

"All my brothers were ostracized, falsely accused, and chased away merely for having awakened their abilities. Granted, we had to leave where we were living and ended up like this, but we have our own rules and conscience. Unlike those who drove us away."

The leader's voice was low and gentle. But at the same time, it held an odd strength. Yuder began to wonder what his power could be.

'He probably wouldn't tell me even if I asked.'

"Are you one of those who was driven out?"

"Me? Ha-ha. Maybe I am, maybe I'm not."

"Do you think we'll just sit back and watch you guys leave?"

Gakane cut in, and the leader tilted his head.

"Then what else can you do?"

Gakane's eyebrows twitched, as if he hadn't expected the leader to retort that way.

"What?"

"I've given you all the necessary information. If you don't find the person you're looking for right now, that person will soon be executed. Yet, you have time to catch small-time thieves like us? Ha-ha. There's a priority in everything, brother. If you try to catch us first, we'll resist with all our might. You can't catch two rabbits at once."

"Why am I your brother?"

"If we have the same power, aren't we all brothers, if not sisters?"

Not making any sense, this guy must be crazy. Yuder read such thoughts from Gakane's eyes, which turned to him.

'...Definitely cunning. He figured out why we're here in such a short time and played it this way.'

Moreover, the fact that the leader wasn't wrong provoked Yuder's wariness even more.

Yuder glanced at the leader's face for a moment, then exhaled briefly. If he used all his power here, he could capture those in front of him. But it was clear that it wouldn't end there, not knowing where the bandits' hideout was.

As they said, they were small-time thieves, for now.

'And they don't show hostility towards us.'

"Are you angry? Or surprised? It's nice to finally see some change in that icy expression of yours."

The leader, noticing the slight change in Yuder's expression, asked with a laugh.

"I was just thinking."

"Thinking?"

"How many days do you estimate it would take to solve this matter, return, and round you all up?"

"..."

His voice was soft, but the implications were as chilling as a well-honed blade. The bandits who had been lurking behind their leader and watching the proceedings jumped back with a start when their eyes met Yuder's. They instinctively felt that his words were not in jest.

"...Ha, ha. Look at that. We have a formidable brother amongst us today."

"I have no brother like you."

'That's it, Yuder! Way to go!' Gakane clenched his fist and cheered silently, his face beaming with satisfaction.

"Shouldn't there be a comeback if there is a departure? We never harm the innocent. My brethren, at my request, do not lay hands on those who share our powers. We are the losers who have lost everything for the past two years, and all that's left for us is to flee and survive. Even so, you want to arrest us?"

His tongue, soft as a velvet snake, stirred guilt that lay dormant. Jimmy appeared to be moved by his words, his face grimacing as if he were about to cry.

But who could vouch that his words were true? As long as it was unclear what truths and lies he hid within his cunning words, it was impossible to believe everything he said.

Yuder Aile had seen too many scenes play out to be swayed by such sentimental manipulations.

Yuder stood, blocking Jimmy's view, and spoke.

"If I were you, I'd use the time you're wasting on wordplay to flee further. Don't misconstrue your priorities. It seems that my priorities might change at any moment."

At Yuder's fierce words, the leader's eyes widened a bit, followed by a burst of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha."

"Le, leader, let's go."

"Why do you keep provoking him? He's not ordinary."

"You go first."

The leader quietly commanded the bandits who tried to hold him back. His voice, following his laughter, was both warm and chilling.

"Huh?"

"I think I have something more to say to these people."

"Wh, what do you mean? How can we go somewhere without you? How can...."

"I can catch up later. Go back and tell Ersi to leave first. I'll be right there."

"Leader...!"

The bandits wore confused expressions, but after a moment, they nodded. Despite their lack of understanding, their obedience suggested that their leader had their absolute trust.

"We'll wait for you, so make sure to come, leader!"

As the bandits called out desperately and disappeared, the leader, who had lightly waved his hand at them, turned his body and looked at Yuder. Despite being left alone, his gaze was remarkably relaxed.

"Thank you for not capturing my brethren."

"There's no need to catch the tail when you can go for the head."

Hearing Yuder's reply, the leader smirked, his left eye gleaming with an inscrutable light in the darkness.

"So, what is it that you want to say to us?"