

## Turning 681

### Chapter 681

'Permission to the third basement. The abilities of Reneve and Cyregina... Yes. I'm beginning to understand.'

Earlier, Nukijo had mentioned that the problem was that both individuals from Durban had awakened their powers.

On the day Reneve awakened, it wasn't just her. Her longed-for friend, Cyril, also known as Cyregina, had awakened as well.

Reneve's ability was to suppress the power of other Awakeners, and if Cyregina's ability was to make her body and weapons invisible, could there be a better combination for escaping from there?

If Reneve had known that Cyregina was alive and possessed such an ability, she would not have remained so quietly confined for so long. A plan to escape with the others trapped in the surrounding rooms, by communicating with them and releasing their suppressed abilities, would have quickly formed in her mind.

'Nukijo's insistence that Reneve use her power, whether awake or asleep, now seems not only to prevent the Awakeners on the third floor from escaping. Perhaps it was also to preemptively prevent Cyregina, unable to bear it, from secretly trying to meet Reneve.'

Even if Cyregina used her invisibility to sneak into the third underground floor, her invisibility would dissipate as soon as she stepped in, due to Reneve's power suppression ability.

Cyregina, despite her remarkable ability, had no choice but to serve under Nukijo and be absolutely obedient to gain access to the third floor, probably for that reason.

However, Nukijo likely never intended to let the two meet, regardless of how obedient and compliant they were.

If only one of them had awakened. Or if Cyregina's ability wasn't invisibility that allowed attacks while hidden, things might not have escalated to this extent. It was indeed a cruel twist of fate.

"You died too easily."

Yuder coldly gazed at Nukijo's corpse, then felt a cloth settle on his shoulders and turned his head. Kishiar, who had draped the cloak over him, smiled brightly as their eyes met.

"Now that there's no need to keep wearing those clothes, you should put on something warm."

"...Thank you, but isn't this your garment, Commander?"

They were currently wearing clothes said to have been worn by boys and girls in ancient times during ceremonies to wish for victory. The attire, revealing much skin and loosely fitted with no buttons but only a few golden strings tied in knots, was hardly suitable for winter. However, its design allowed unencumbered movement, which was an advantage.

The existence of these clothes and the changing room were disclosed by Elpkins and other Awakeners who had subdued Nukijo's group backstage. The backstage area included a makeshift changing room where concept costumes, created anew for each day's combat, were stored. Clothes for the day's participants were already laid out there for them to change into.

Reluctantly, they had to wear these to avoid suspicion before going on stage and starting their task.

Fortunately, the design was somewhat better than the rag-like garment Elpkins originally wore, which barely covered the essentials.

However, Kishiar managed to pull off even that unrealistic attire terrifyingly well. Although his face was vaguely altered, his body remained unchanged. His broad shoulders and slender waist made even the roughest sack look as if it were custom-made for him.

According to the Awakeners, those participating for the first time today could wear robes or cloaks over their clothes without arousing suspicion. Thus, they wrapped themselves in the outer garments they had originally worn. The rest of the clothes were distributed to other Awakeners like Elpkins, who were dressed in sacks.

Kishiar had kept his outer garment on all this while, but Yuder had discarded his earlier, resulting in his body being splattered with blood here and there. He was concerned about soiling Kishiar's clean cloak with this mess.

"I'm fine, please just take it."

"There's too much blood on you. If you go out like this, you'll lose body heat."

Yuder didn't seem to mind the blood, considering it wasn't his own and he could summon fire if he got cold.

"Then, I'll go and fetch the clothes I threw away earlier."

"This one?"

At some unknown point, Kishiar had picked up Yuder's discarded garment, now a black, tattered cloth bundle. It was ripped and covered in various liquids and dirt.

"I saw it on the way here, but it's already been trampled and ruined."

"..."

"This cloak is enchanted like your gloves. It's made of a fabric that doesn't easily stain. Don't worry and wear it. That's why I kept it on."

His last words were almost a whisper, soft yet tinged with an unwillingness that made it difficult to refuse.

Perhaps Kishiar had been quite concerned about Yuder's condition without showing it during the fight.

"But if I wear this, won't you, Commander, get cold?"

"Don't forget that I've seen the pinnacle of swordsmanship. This is nothing to me. And we'll likely meet Nathan on our way out. He must have brought an outer garment, knowing the plan."

Yuder wondered if it wouldn't be better for him to wear one of Nathan Zuckerman's garments. However, Kishiar's expression was resolute and radiant, seeming unyielding to any suggestion.

'Hmm... From experience, this isn't a mood to refuse.'

Kishiar, who usually didn't obstruct Yuder's actions, could persuade him perfectly when needed. His current reaction was strikingly similar to the firm yet gentle demeanor he had shown when he was blinded in the Great Sarain Forest.

Finally, Yuder nodded in agreement. Only then did Kishiar smile and properly tie the cloak. Wearing the cloak didn't completely hide the blood splattered all over him, but it was enough to prevent people from recoiling in shock at first glance.

Just then, the Awakeners, having calmed their excitement from the victory, approached them. They were startled to see Nukijo's dead body but soon murmured with mixed emotions.

"Is he dead?"

"Really dead? Just like that?"

Nukijo had been at the top of the power structure inside the fighting arena. The Awakeners felt a mixture of emptiness, anger, and relief that such a seemingly indestructible figure had died so vainly. They regretted that he died too easily for his deeds, but the sight of his corpse also brought a sense of real relief that the nightmare was finally over.

The surviving subordinates of Nukijo merely looked on, with no one lamenting the death of their leader. Thus, Nukijo's body was left untouched, his eyes unshut.

They gathered Nukijo's subordinates, who showed no further will to resist, and tightly bound them together. This was to facilitate an easier handling for the Cavalry members who would join them later.

During this time, Yuder called Reneve, who had been standing at the back, to inform her about the whereabouts of the friend she had been so desperately searching for.

"Before Nukijo died, I was fortunate to learn about your friend's fate. It turns out she was alive."

"Cyril... she was alive? Are you sure?"

Reneve, who had believed Cyril to be utterly deceased, displayed a mix of bewilderment and joy, but Yuder, knowing her happiness would not last, suppressed his emotions.

"Before I proceed, I want to confirm if your friend's real name is Cyregina."

"Ah... Yes, that's right. Cyril is just a Durban-style nickname. We never used her real name... But why do you ask?"

It was as expected; the probability that Cyregina was not Cyril was nonexistent. Yuder took a deep breath and spoke softly.

"It seems she was here, just like you. She served under Nukijo and went by the name Regina."

"Under Nukijo, as a subordinate?"

Reneve questioned in disbelief, doubting her ears at such an unexpected revelation.

"No... That can't be. Would she continue to work here, knowing I am here? In this dreadful place? Are you sure there's no mistake? If she worked here... they would have no reason to hide Cyril's fate from me. What exactly..."

"The truth can only be confirmed by the person herself, but I suspect the reason might have been to save you."

"To save me?"

As Reneve asked in a daze, the young Awakeners of the Star of Nagran, who were nearby, perked up their ears and turned their heads. The familiar name had caught their attention.

"Regina? We know her. She was the one who led us here."

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"Regina? We know her. She was the one who led us here."

After those words, the young Awakeners began to chatter among themselves.

"That person we saw yesterday and today, her name was Regina, right? She explained to us about the Awakeners' arena and asked if we were interested."

"Ah, the one who did the final check before the fight began? Yes, that was her name."

"She seemed kind when inviting us to the arena, but today, she was a bit scary. Looking back, she probably didn't need to be nice anymore, knowing what this place was..."

The speaker was Jack, the curly-haired boy who had almost fought Yuder. As Jack spoke, Reneve's face stiffened rapidly, while his friends shook their heads, offering a different perspective.

"That's not it. She didn't suddenly become scary today; we've felt something odd about her since yesterday. Don't you remember worrying if it was really okay for us to fight here?"

"Right. Jack, you were too excited about earning money to listen properly. I felt different. She kept telling us frightening things, making me wonder if this place wasn't meant for kids like us."

"I felt the same! When I hesitated to sign the application, she whispered in my ear that if I was scared, I should just leave... I signed it impulsively, but now I regret not walking away."

"Really? I just thought she went on about how dangerous it could be, but also how much money we could make..."

Jack mumbled, looking bewildered.

Yuder gleaned new information from the disjointed conversation about Regina, who had been nervous about missing colleagues while doing the last checks before the fight.

Her stern attitude towards the boys and the mention that she could not go further to check on her absent colleagues suggested a harsh demeanor. However, now knowing that Regina was actually Cyril, Yuder's perception of these details shifted.

After hearing this, Yuder turned to Reneve. She looked back at him with a complex gaze, demanding the truth.

"Tell me everything. What happened to Cyril? All of it."

"Understood."

Yuder succinctly narrated the facts he had gathered and surmised from Nukijo and the surroundings.

Regina, as an Awakener with the power of invisibility, had been tasked by Nukijo to deal with Awakeners trying to escape the arena. She did whatever Nukijo asked, aiming for a promotion and the permission to descend to the third underground level.

He also shared that Nukijo seemed reluctant to let Reneve and Regina meet, possibly fearing they might join forces and escape.

After hearing everything, Reneve was speechless for a long time.

Although she had been imprisoned for a long while, she was not foolish. She quickly grasped how Nukijo had manipulated them and the resulting situation they were in. The news of her long-lost friend's survival brought no joy, only a realization she couldn't celebrate.

Reneve remained silent thereafter, lost in deep despair and shock, no longer processing the words spoken to her.

In the midst of the chaos, the Awakeners who were tidying up the scene discovered the entrance to a secret passage that Nukijo was about to enter and cleared the debris blocking the way. The passage, gaping darkly, was a mess with dozens of footprints left in haste by the departing VIPs. Having confirmed this, Kishiar commanded everyone to enter the passage.

Finally, in front of the Awakeners filled with the hope of escape, he twisted the magic tool to reveal his true face completely.

“Ah, the face...?”

“At last, I can properly introduce myself with my real face.”

Stunned by his astonishing appearance, the Awakeners couldn't hide their overwhelming emotions even as they feared upon hearing him introduce himself as the Commander of the Cavalry, Kishiar.

“Ah...!”

“It's because everyone contributed their strength that we could come this far without anyone getting hurt. Trust me and follow, I will do my best until the end.”

“Of course.”

The Awakeners responded energetically. However, even as they ascended the secret passage, Reneve silently kept to the back, maintaining his quiet.

Yuder glanced at her before speaking softly to Kishiar.

“What do you plan to do with those captured here?”

“Well... I plan to stick to the original plan.”

According to the original plan, Nukijo and his remnants should be immediately arrested and pay the price according to the law. They had been involved in illegal human trafficking and had sacrificed many in the fighting pits, so they deserved no less than the death penalty.

Even those who merely followed Nukijo but did not participate in the pit fights should be investigated for their crimes and duly punished. Only by administering proper justice could they justify going after others operating illegal fighting rings beyond Nukijo.

However, the case of Cyregina was more complicated. Even if she didn't follow Nukijo by her own will, the crimes she committed were clear.

‘According to other Awakeners, even while working under Nukijo, she seemed to have tried to do what she could for others... But if that's true, it leaves a bitter taste.’

As a Commander, Yuder knew that not everyone could be saved according to the situation. That's what he had learned during his long tenure as Commander Yudrain Aile. If a crime was committed, it was right to pay the price.

But he felt uneasy knowing that Nukijo was the root cause.

‘If that guy had lived, we could have squeezed out evidence and testimony about this matter and sorted out the disputes more clearly.’

Judging a case based only on circumstances was extremely tricky. It was even more so when it came to meting out punishment for crimes. Without clear evidence, Cyregina was likely to face a harsh sentence. While Yuder pondered this, Kishiar seemed to read his thoughts and spoke.

“Are you concerned?”

“Yes.”

Yuder answered honestly.

“It is indeed a complex matter. But there's always a way.”

“Do you have something in mind?”

Responding to Yuder's question, Kishiar spoke in a gentle voice.

“Before apprehending those who have sinned, there's a law that allows for leniency through negotiation if someone from the inside turns in favor of justice and assists the investigation. Like that person earlier who killed Nukijo and begged for his life.”

“...”

“Hasn’t Cyregina still got one more chance to prove that she truly didn’t follow Nukijo willingly and could, given the right circumstances, prove loyal to His Majesty the Emperor and be able to help others?”

Upon hearing those words, Yuder suddenly realized exactly where they were.

This was the secret passage through which the VIPs had escaped. If the Cavalry had surrounded the area as planned, those exiting would be immediately captured for investigation and punishment.

In this process, the subordinates of Nukijo, including Cyregina, would be faced with two choices.

They could remain loyal to Nukijo until the end, protect the VIPs, and thereby confirm their guilt.

Or they could defect, cooperate with the Cavalry, and pass on information, thereby securing a chance for a reduced sentence.

"...We should ascend as quickly as possible."

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"...We should ascend as quickly as possible."

"Indeed. That would be wise."

Kishiar agreed with Yuder's words.

However, surprisingly, there was no need to hurry. The ones they were seeking appeared before them on their own.

"I hear the clash of weapons from afar."

"Could it be..."

Upon seeing Yuder's expression, Kishiar nodded.

"It seems our exceptional allies have found the secret passage first. We must go before the standoff intensifies. And... Reneve?"

At Kishiar's call, Reneve, who had been trailing behind, barely lifted her head.

"...Yes?"

"Do you still remember what we asked of you yesterday?"

"Ah..."

Reneve's expression became subtle.

Yesterday, when they promised to rescue her, Kishiar and Yuder had requested Reneve to perform a few tasks.

The first was to inform those trapped on the third underground level of the situation and then to withdraw her restrained power.

The second was to immediately exert her power upon discovering Nukijo's Awakener subordinate with stealth abilities or if they encountered any other possible Awakener subordinates of Nukijo.

The first task was important, but the second was more crucial. If Nukijo had more Awakener subordinates, no one could counter them as effectively as Reneve.

But it turned out that Nukijo's Awakener subordinate was none other than Cyregina.

"I remember..."

"Good. The time to fulfill the second request seems to be approaching soon. I'll rely on you the moment we encounter those who are fighting."

Kishiar's expression was calm and relaxed, like someone oblivious, but as always with his actions, they harbored meanings too complex for even Yuder to fully surmise.

'Reneve must be tested by bringing up the second request without prior warning about Cyregina's remaining opportunity.'

Reneve bit her lip and nodded.

"Yes."

Yuder, anticipating that Reneve might not be able to exert her full power, firmly placed his hand on the hilt of his sword, ready to intervene at any moment.

But his concerns were unfounded.

As soon as Reneve heard the screams of those battling an invisible attacker, she did not hesitate to unleash her ability.

And now, the worst-case scenario was averted.

Cyregina. While Cyregina had inflicted injuries on some of the Imperial Army and a portion of the Cavalry, there were no serious casualties. In fact, Cyregina's injuries were much more severe.

'It's admirable that they could handle a situation against an unknown Awakener with abilities that they have never seen before without panic, but it's disappointing that they got injured against an Awakener who was almost an amateur.'

Yuder resolved to prepare a much more challenging and intense training regimen for the Cavalry members of the Southern branch. If they had seen the names of the training exercises he was contemplating, they would have immediately collapsed in terror. While these thoughts flashed through his mind, Nathan Zuckerman approached.

He looked back and forth between the blood-covered Yuder wearing Kishiar's cloak and the lord smiling proudly next to him in an outfit showing off his skin, and then silently pulled out a small pouch he had been carrying on his back. Inside, as Kishiar had expected, was another cloak.

"I thought you might bring something like this. Thank you, Nathan."

"Not at all."

As the adjutant, he ought to have advised Kishiar, a noble of imperial lineage and a Duke, to consider his dignity more closely, but Nathan Zuckerman was as composed as his lord. His demeanor revealed a master craftsman's experience, suggesting this wasn't his first time handling such matters.

What had Nathan Zuckerman experienced to possess such preparedness? For the first time, Yuder felt a spark of curiosity, but given the situation, he remained silent.

Kishiar, draped in a light and elegant cloak, winked at Yuder, then turned to address the Cavalry members who were busily binding the VIPs and Nukijo's subordinates.

"Tie them up, and gather as much information and names as possible. We don't know if any of them will try to escape or swap places once outside, taking advantage of the chaos."

"Understood!"

"Stop your nonsense! Names, indeed! We will never reveal them to the likes of you!"

As expected, the VIPs protested vehemently. Nukijo's subordinates, too, remained silent, sealing their lips.

The Cavalry members murmured amongst themselves, frustrated.

"Hmm... A few slaps or hanging them upside down to tickle their feet might loosen their tongues. Would that be too much?"

The VIPs shuddered at this dreadful suggestion, hurling insults.

"You vulgar brutes. I was merely kidnapped! Anyone who dares lay a hand on an innocent will face retribution in the name of my family!"

"Will you take responsibility for your words? I'll let the world know the Cavalry captures innocents without proper verification!"

"I am innocent. Do you really think the people of Charloin will believe your accusations?"

It was clear to any observer that these individuals were guilty. The idea of Nukijo's VIPs being innocent victims of kidnapping was preposterous.

But those present were powerful enough to turn such lies into truth, should there be no witnesses to their actions here. They continued to brazenly claim their innocence, glaring at Nukijo's subordinates who had brought them.

Seeing that they knew how to twist the situation to their advantage, the Cavalry members felt both annoyance and confusion. They had never encountered such brazen behavior, even when arresting nobles involved in illegal auctions in the West. These individuals seemed to have skins as thick as iron.

Kishiar, closely observing, spoke up again.

"So everyone claims to be innocent. Are they truly saying they saw nothing of what transpired here today?"

"Yes, that's right! ...Ah!"

A noble, responding arrogantly, suddenly screamed, reeling as if struck. The culprit was, of course, Yuder Aile, standing beside Kishiar.

"Show respect. He is the Commander of the Cavalry."

His voice was slow, emotionless, and cold.

That single sentence had a profound effect. The air around them turned icy, and the bound individuals, sensing their fear, fell silent.

The fact that these individuals still dared such insolence, even after seeing some members called Kishiar "Commander," indicated that many still underestimated Duke Kishiar La Orr, the master of the Divine Sword and the Commander of the Cavalry. Despite knowing his achievements, they pretended ignorance, revealing their malicious nature.

Was there any need to tolerate such scoundrels?

'No. There wasn't.'

However, Yuder had to apologize to Reneve, who might have momentarily suffered a setback in her ability to suppress due to the power Yuder had unleashed.

"I'm sorry. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. It was startling when part of it broke suddenly..."

Fortunately, the power Yuder had summoned was minimal, so Reneve was only startled, not injured. Yuder had anticipated this and had moderated his strength accordingly, which was a relief.

'But a small force doesn't mean the impact on the recipient is lessened.'

What Yuder had done was to use the power of the wind to hurl a tiny piece of gravel from the ground. Even a small stone, when hurled at high speed, can hurt more than a rock. The VIPs would have learned that lesson well enough by now.

Amid the icy atmosphere, Kishiar couldn't help but let out an embarrassed laugh.

"Oh dear. Thanks to a capable assistant, there's no need to raise my voice anymore. I'm truly grateful."

"..."

"Yes, claims can be freely made, but no matter how much one tries to hide, the truth always emerges. I believe the people who remember best what these 'amnesiacs' did are right here, but I wonder if truly no one is willing to speak up."

"..."

"I'm sure there are those who understand what will benefit their future and won't forget that it's ultimately up to them to decide."

The subordinates of Nukijo weren't completely oblivious. Realizing Kishiar's indirect persuasion, some of them twitched nervously. However, one of them yelled out in a rage.

"Anyone who speaks will not be spared! Keep quiet!"

But Kishiar, looking past them at Cyregina, smiled. Cyregina, who had been staring blankly at him, glanced at Reneve and then clenched her teeth, swallowing hard.

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Cyregina, who had been staring blankly at him, glanced at Reneve and then clenched her teeth, swallowing hard.

"I will speak!"

Yet, before Cyregina could proceed, one of Nukijo's subordinates, who had been cautiously biding his time, eagerly stepped forward, raising his hand. This sly individual, who had been seeking an escape since hearing of Nukijo's demise, was undeterred by the fierce glares and veiled threats from the VIPs and fellow comrades, and asked in a nervous tone, "Is it enough to confirm that everyone here is a guest of Nukijo?"

"Merely confirming that is somewhat insufficient," replied Kishiar, who desired the names and information of the VIPs.

Hearing this, the man quickly rattled off a few names. However, these lacked the most crucial element: the surnames of prominent families, and he failed to accurately identify the individuals he named.

"You lie to save your own skin, spouting nonsense names! Where are these fictitious people you speak of?" berated one of the VIPs.

"I... I may be slightly mistaken, but I've told you all I know! Isn't that enough?" the man stammered, his words clearly falling short of being helpful. They were mere utterances, far from constituting evidence.

However, Kishiar, with an inscrutable smile, gestured to the Cavalry members, issuing an order, "Release this man from his bonds."

"What? Ah... Yes, understood," they complied, though clearly puzzled by their leader's command. The special forces of the empire, watching from a step behind, also wore expressions of concern.

Contrastingly, the freed subordinate of Nukijo, massaging his sore arms, smirked, his eyes betraying thoughts of escape.

This stirred noticeable unrest among Nukijo's other subordinates, who had been warily eyeing each other. Gradually, they began to speak.

"I think I remember one name..."

"Me too..."

"Silence, you fools!" another shouted, attempting to quell them, but to no avail. They began calling out names they remembered, yet these were as muddled as the first.

Kishiar, unshaken by the chaotic shouts, asked with a smile, "Is that all?"

Silence fell.

"Not one of you correctly matched a name with a family. A pity. There could have been significant leniency for anyone able to do so."

Again, silence.

"Truly, no more?"

"...I know them all," a faint voice broke the stillness. All eyes turned to Cyregina.

"Hmm, do you? Let's hear it," said Kishiar, seemingly without great expectation.

Cyregina slowly turned her head, scanning the faces of each guest. Starting from the one at the far left, she pointed and began to name each. "The guest in the green attire is Coles from the Salmaka family, the second child. Next to him is Eneska from the Abkachia family, the fifth child. And beside them is..."

The previously boisterous VIPs' complexions drastically changed, their surprised and dismayed expressions revealing Cyregina's correctness.

'How could she possibly...?'

"It's all lies!"

"How dare someone like you utter my name...!" they exclaimed in disbelief.

Someone shouted, but their cry was empty, lacking force. Cyregina remained indifferent to the curses hurled at her. Unperturbed by the uproar, she successfully recited the name of every last person. Astonishingly, the information she provided included not just names and families but also the order and positions in which they had arrived and seated themselves at the arena that day.

"That is all," she concluded, and a prolonged silence followed her words.

The first to break the silence was Kishiar, his expression as calm as when others had chaotically spat out random names. "Truly detailed and accurate information. It doesn't feel like something made up. I can understand recalling the names, but how did you remember the rest so precisely?"

"I have been working here since the very inception of the Awakeners' arena under Nukijo, the owner of this place. Nukijo always entrusted me with guarding and entertaining the VIPs in the VIP section, and ordered me to eavesdrop on their conversations for any useful information. With ears, one naturally ends up memorizing such things."

"What did you say?"

"How dare he!"

Exclamations of dismay erupted from various quarters. But with Nukijo dead, there was no one present to bear the brunt of these accusations.

"Useful information collected by Nukijo, you say? An unexpected harvest. Are you willing to share more? Of course, the Cavalry will compensate accordingly, based on the accuracy and usefulness of the information."

Cyregina's eyes flickered slightly. She closed them tightly and then opened them again, her expression completely transformed.

"Of course. If a noble person like yourself wishes, I will reveal all that I know. I assure you, no one knows their dirty secrets and what they sought to hide better than I do."

With these grave words, Cyregina knelt and bowed deeply.

"Traitor!"

Curses followed from behind her, but they had no effect on her or the Cavalry.

'This will surely secure a reduction in my sentence.'

It was, in hindsight, obvious that Cyregina would know so much about the VIPs. Who else but Nukijo would use an Awakener, capable of remaining unseen, to gather such information?

Yet, it would have been difficult to extract this information so dramatically and conclusively, and turn it into a sure deal for leniency, had it not been for Kishiar.

'Perhaps... he had guessed this outcome from the moment he heard that an Awakener with invisibility skills was tasked with protecting the VIPs.'

Yuder, finally easing his mind, turned his head. His gaze found Reneve, who was covering her face, her shoulders shaking.

'Many repeat their crimes even after serving their sentence. It's true that punishment alone does not reform. But... perhaps these individuals will be different.'

With a smile, Kishiar then commanded everyone to head outside.

"Once we leave, transport everyone to the southern branch of the Cavalry for investigation. It will be tiring for all, but I must ask this of you."

"Understood!"

"What? Taken to the Cavalry? You said you'd release us for giving information!"

A recently unbound subordinate of Nukijo protested loudly.

"Well. I said to release the bonds, not that there wouldn't be an investigation."

"What...!"

Stunned, the subordinate could not continue his protest. His inability to retort with curses was due to Yuder, standing right next to Kishiar, flashing a cold glare.

The VIPs, too, were reluctant to be taken away, but they became remarkably docile after making eye contact with Yuder.

As they finally emerged from the collapsed hole into the outside world, passing the Black Orca Tavern, a handful of Cavalry members guarding the perimeter cheered. Piled up like a mountain beside them were the subordinates of Nukijo.

"Commander! Yuder! You're all safe! Of course, I expected nothing less!"

Elpkins, who had been protected among them, wrapped in a mantle, rushed over in a flurry.

"You've returned safely! I, I've applied to join the Cavalry!"

"Is that so."

His face, tear-streaked from emotion, looked somewhat comical, but Yuder did not laugh.

"Then we shall soon see you in the Cavalry."

"Yes! I'm truly... truly grateful!"

As the crowd gathered around to watch, the bound individuals were either dragged or carried off in a line. No matter how much the VIPs raged or bowed their heads to hide their faces, the Cavalry members treated them no differently than Nukijo's subordinates. Amidst the screams and shouts, only Cyregina moved silently and calmly, maintaining her composure.

Thus, the long day ended for the Cavalry Commander and his assistant after arriving at the southern branch.

And naturally, this news quickly spread to the capital and across the Empire, shocking many.

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"Is it true that Duke Peletta is currently in Charloin? Moreover, he demolished an illegal betting fight club and arrested several nobles' sons who were habitual gamblers? What is this all about?"

To this inquiry of Crown Prince Katchian, his attendant bowed deeply.

"Exactly as I've reported, Your Highness. Duke Peletta went there incognito to personally oversee the recruitment of the Cavalry. It was during this time that the incident occurred."

"I'm pointing out your dullness in failing to notice a person, who I thought was within the Cavalry Headquarters, moving all the way there! If I'm to remain ignorant of such covert operations, what use do I have for you as my eyes and ears?"

Prince Katchian's face flared with anger, prompting the attendant to quickly bow and apologize.

"I am deeply sorry. But Duke Peletta moved with minimal personnel and disguised himself. Even the locals of the south only recognized him after the event unfolded. Even Duke Diarca was unaware of Duke Peletta's visit there..."

"Are you suggesting it's normal for me to be unaware if Duke Diarca is?"

"No, Your Highness, that was not my intention. I meant to imply that the Cavalry moved with such secrecy that..."

"Save your excuses. It seems you have another master to serve. Leave now!"

The Crown Prince crumpled a letter on the table and threw it. The attendant, murmuring an apology, hastily retreated, picking up the crumpled paper and backing out of the room. As he exited, the sound of something breaking came from within the Crown Prince's room.

Shuddering at the thought that it could have been his own head, the attendant was approached by another who whispered secretly.

"You should've been more cautious when discussing Duke Peletta or the Cavalry. After the recent event where he attended the family dinner with only Duke Diarca, he's become quite sensitive."

"I was careful, but look at the result. I thought his relationship with Duke Diarca had improved while he focused on the investigation of the intruder in the Sun Palace, but he seemed even more enraged at the mention of Duke Diarca."

"Perhaps it's not just about Duke Diarca. You weren't here this morning, but the Emperor sent an urgent letter regarding the Sun Palace intrusion investigation."

"Ah... Is this crumpled paper the one?"

Still holding the crumpled paper, the attendant sighed.

"His Highness the Duke must be quite concerned. He's been assisting His Highness the Crown Prince in capturing the Sun Palace intruder, hasn't he?"

"Indeed, it's his efforts that matter. Wasn't he the one who sent the healer?"

"Where else could one find such a noble person..."

Despite being the Crown Prince's attendant, his comments leaned more towards Duke Diarca, justifying the Crown Prince's anger.

The noise from the Crown Prince's room eventually subsided after a while. An attendant muttered.

"If only those healers were quick to sense and come at such times! They are always away when needed."

"Indeed. If they came to treat His Highness, why do they wander so much? Lately, they are hardly seen around."

"I heard that they went to inspect the new accommodations they had acquired. There are rumors that since they could not completely heal the Crown Prince's deep-seated illness, they might be looking for an opportunity to flee."

"Surely not. Such an act would trouble Baron Renbow, the overseer of those men..."

At that moment, the subject of the attendants' conversation, Baron Renbow, was at the residence of Duke Diarca.

Duke Diarca, with a tobacco pipe in his mouth that clouded his mind, smiled and began to speak.

"That fox-like Awakener who called himself sage promised to mess up the recruitment of the Cavalry. I wonder what he actually did. Did he know that Duke Peletta was in the south?"

"That is..."

Baron Renbow, sweating profusely from his back, trailed off. What could he possibly say in this situation? He and the sage had planned to infiltrate spies into the new recruits of the Cavalry and report back. However, their initial attempt to plant people in the west had failed miserably when

Yuder Aile appeared like a ghost, weeding out all their spies and rejecting them. The mercenaries sent for revenge merely took the money and disappeared, having escaped so effectively that not even a trace of them was left.

Yet, the real plan was to be executed in the south, and it seemed fine until Duke Peletta suddenly appeared there, destroying an illegal Awakener fighting ring and earning the adulation of the Empire's citizens.

Despite these circumstances, the sage was strangely unresponsive, making it impossible to share information with the Awakeners they intended to infiltrate into the south, leaving their plans in disarray.

'Had I only known this, I would not be at such a loss for words here...'

Even now, if the sage had been by his side, Baron Renbow wouldn't have had to endure this pressure alone before Duke Diarca. However, the sage had suddenly left on some important business today, leaving Renbow to come here alone.

Had he not trusted the sage deeply, he might have suspected him of abandoning Renbow to escape on his own.

"I need not hear it to know the answer."

Duke Diarca exhaled a deep puff of smoke. Baron Renbow barely managed to suppress a cough and began to speak.

"Cough, cough, ahem. I am deeply sorry for causing you concern. However, we have not been unprepared. The sage assured me that he knows many in the south and confidently promised to plant people there who would become your men, Duke. The recruitment for the Cavalry is not yet over, so please watch a little longer."

"Indeed. Your task was only that part, not to predict and prevent the mishaps caused by Duke Peletta. Of course, had you been properly prepared, I suppose you wouldn't have missed such movements..."

It's foolish to only focus on one task when entrusted with many. Duke Diarca's laugh, filled with thinly veiled scorn, was apparent in his attitude, suggesting he didn't expect much from them if they

couldn't even properly gather information about Duke Peletta's movement to the south. Baron Renbow's hands trembled slightly with shame under his cold laughter.

"Renbow, as you said, the recruitment for the Cavalry is not yet over. Let's see what results it brings. As for me, I have no knowledge of your actions and merely await the outcome."

The underlying meaning of his words was clear: should Renbow and the sage's plot fail, Duke Diarca's side would claim total ignorance of the affair's proceedings.

"...Yes, thank you."

"By the way, how fares His Highness the Crown Prince? Is his recovery progressing well?"

"Ah... Yes, of course. I have heard that recently, he has had no issues with either meals or sleep. His Highness is also diligently carrying out the investigation of the intrusion into the Sun Palace, aided as he is by Duke Diarca's assistance..."

"Ah, speaking of which. Did you know? Today, a bouquet of flowers was sent to me from the Sun Palace."

Caught off guard by this sudden revelation, Renbow wore a look of bewilderment.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. It was a bouquet of Macarea flowers, bestowed as a mark of appreciation for dedicated service."

Only then did Renbow notice a previously unseen, unfamiliar vase placed where Duke Diarca's gaze lingered. The luxurious glass vase, faintly adorned with the emblem of the Sun Palace used by the Emperor, contained vibrant Macarea flowers. Duke Diarca, with a cold gaze, murmured,

"Sending this to me instead of the Crown Prince's Palace, the meaning is clear. His Majesty knows I am the one truly at work, a subtle command to remain compliant."

Silence fell, a bold, yet elegantly veiled provocation, all the more poignant as an accolade from the Emperor could not be casually discarded.

Renbow recalled the youthful face of the Emperor, briefly seen at a recent celebration of the Cavalry's victory. Until his recent retreat due to illness, the Emperor had been aggressively implementing policies to strengthen imperial power and suppress the nobles, engaging in such provocations with the leaders of the four great ducal houses. It felt as if those days had returned.

Does one become fearless facing death, or was there another reason for such actions?

"Is the rumor of His Majesty's critical illness true or false? It's quite perplexing, isn't it?"

Duke Diarca echoed Renbow's thoughts exactly.

It was a secretive conversation, unheard by others. Yet sometimes, even inanimate objects seem to have ears, capturing the words of men.

From the crumpled letter in the hands of the attendants and the Macarea flowers in front of Duke Diarca, a faint, unseen haze seemed to swirl, as if by some unspoken agreement. Meanwhile, far from the Bright Palace where the Crown Prince resided, Emperor Keilusa, sitting in front of his desk in the Sun Palace, abruptly opened his eyes.

"Huh."

"Your lips are dry, Your Majesty. I will refill your tea."

The loyal, aged head attendant meticulously poured tea into the Emperor's cup. After sipping the tea, Emperor Keilusa finally spoke, his eyes clear and resolute.

Chapter 686

"Your lips are dry, Your Majesty. I will refill your tea."

The loyal, aged head attendant meticulously poured tea into the Emperor's cup. After sipping the tea, Emperor Keilusa finally spoke, his eyes clear and resolute.

"The reactions are largely as expected. The confusion over Duke Peletta's journey to the south and their attempts to discern our movements."

"Is that so? That's fortunate."

"Duke Diarca plans to use Baron Renbow and the Crown Prince's healers to mess with the Cavalry recruitment. I must send a letter to Kishiar."

"Though Kishiar might already suspect, more detailed information is always better."

The head attendant smiled kindly.

"Yes. And, naturally, despite receiving flowers, Duke Diarca seems not to withdraw from the Sun Palace's intruder investigation. That's good for us. We'll prepare for their proposed suspects while subtly informing the Crown Prince about the real culprit. And we should plant something in Baron Renbow's house to monitor the situation closely..."

Emperor Keilusa's lips flowed with plans for the future. Observing his calm yet decisive manner of organizing tasks, the head attendant internally swallowed his joy and admiration.

No matter how many times he saw it, the Emperor's healthy, undisturbed dedication to work made the attendant's decades of palace experience seem trivial, often leaving him choked with emotion.

'I never thought I would see him like this again.'

Emperor Keilusa had miraculously returned from death's door. Now, he no longer groaned in pain.

It was all because he had become an Awakener. Since his awakening, he slept well and finished his meals. The palace cook, as loyal as the attendant, still cried when collecting the Emperor's empty plates.

Of course, the aftermath of his near-death experience didn't vanish magically. His body was still frail, and his strength weak, but the servant did not worry.

"Hmm... Has it gotten this late already?"

Glancing at the clock in his office, the Emperor removed his glasses and massaged his temples, easing the fatigue in his eyes.

"It's time for training. I should change."

"Yes, Your Majesty. I will assist you."

The biggest change since the Emperor became an Awakener was this 'training'.

Previously, Emperor Keilusa had little fondness for physical exercise. As a young Crown Prince, he preferred reading or discussing with scholars over dedicating time to horsemanship or swordsmanship.

Even after becoming Emperor, this preference remained unchanged, with minimal exercise for fitness and occasional walks with the Empress.

But now, things were different. The Emperor changed into simple clothes and trained alone in a secluded space, away from prying eyes. This training, meant to control the power of an Awakener, was not just sitting still.

Even the head attendant, watching from a distance, was sometimes surprised by the intensity of the physical exercises, the first step in the training.

'Baron Aile, who taught His Majesty, said that without controlling the body, one cannot control power.'

The Emperor patiently followed the training regimen given by his young teacher, Yuder Aile, before his departure. There were times when the exercises were so strenuous he felt like dying, but that was not a sign of trouble, just a lack of stamina, as his young teacher had coldly pointed out.

"If you desire to wield your power more effectively, you must be prepared to pay the price. People are willing to sacrifice something as precious as their own lives to gain immense power, yet strangely, they are reluctant to invest the safer, always available commodities of effort and time. But I assure you, the latter offers far greater rewards at a far lesser cost."

Yuder Aile spoke calmly, advising against impatience for immediate results.

His words seemed to come from someone who had lived for decades, and they were undeniably true.

During the training, the Emperor was drenched in sweat. He used to dislike this sensation, but now it was different.

Thinking that this sweat was the price for the strength to never lose his beloved again, he wouldn't mind sweating ten times more than he currently did.

"You have sweated profusely. The bathwater is prepared, Your Majesty, please proceed."

After the training, the exhausted Emperor, lying on the ground, struggled to rise upon hearing the head attendant's words. Once he would have needed support, but after his awakening, he always tried to rise on his own.

"There was a message from the Dawn Palace during your training, Your Majesty."

"The Empress? Is it about the walk after dinner?"

"That as well, but it seems there's a pressing matter concerning Herne."

"Herne?"

"Please see this, Your Majesty. It's a letter from the Empress."

The Emperor, soaking in the bath, dried his hands to read the short letter from the Empress. His lowered red eyes soon finished reading and turned back to the head attendant.

"I see. Trouble in Charloin, and naturally, Herne reacts. Duke Herne, recuperating at the southern villa, expressed significant displeasure over this matter."

"I should inform the Cavalry."

"The Empress said that the First Princess of Herne, who conveyed this news, had already gone there."

"Ah, if it's her..."

"Yes."

The Emperor nodded slightly, handing back the letter with a faint smile.

"Perhaps this incident might draw out the fox hiding in its den for years. Well... I trust Kishiar to handle that well. I should focus on matters here, ensuring my brother has nothing to worry about."

Even at that moment, the Emperor was receiving voices of many through the items and agents he had secretly planted.

Secret conspiracies. Conversations thought to be unheard. Information leaking without knowledge.

The Emperor committed all these to memory, knowing they would one day become his weapons.

Finishing his bath, he gave a new order to the head attendant.

"Speaking of which, I heard the Crown Prince's healers have been venturing out frequently. After Kishiar announced the list of Cavalry collaborators, he said they would reveal themselves in time. It might be now. Ensure the Cavalry is handling it without any lapse."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

The head attendant bowed deeply.

----

"Diemon. What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing... It's just that I feel like someone is following us..."

At the time the Emperor issued his order, the five Awakeners following the Sage were outside together for the first time in a long while. Dressed as pilgrims, they followed the Sage unhesitatingly, whispering among themselves.

"Foolish indeed. Did you forget that Nezo, with his abilities, confirmed there were no suspicious people around before we left? Don't look around suspiciously for no reason. What if those with Nahan see you? What do you think they'll think?"

Langbarton chided Diemon, who possessed the ability to copy abilities, causing him to furrow his brow.

"But Nezo can't see everything, can he? And even if the brothers that follow Nahan see us... So what?"

"So what? Are you saying that what you're doing right now is right?"

Langbarton retorted, shocked, as the Sage glanced back at them. The two immediately fell silent, though Langbarton didn't hide his suppressed anger.

'Diemon, this foolish boy. Ever since he accompanied the Sage alone some time ago, he's been increasingly arrogant. Today, he's completely overstepping. He doesn't even know how dangerous a time this is for someone who can only copy other people's abilities!'

Their risky outing today was due to the recently published list of collaborators with the Cavalry. After the shocking incident where the Star of Nagran was mentioned among the collaborators, the Sage had put aside most other matters and was making efforts to find Nahan, suspected to be somewhere in the capital. This task had to be handled secretly, only among those who knew what the Star of Nagran was, making it difficult to seek help from people like Baron Renbow.

Navigating the capital, unfamiliar and without much help, was challenging. They had to move without attracting attention, but surprisingly, it was the Sage who provided significant assistance in this endeavor.

Chapter 687

"I am acquainted with some here who can provide aid," the Sage had revealed.

It was a startling realization that the Sage, too, had a time before awakening, and hence, acquaintances within the capital. The young Awakeners, including Langbarton, had never considered that the Sage might have lived in the capital prior to his awakening.

Yet, that was all they knew; the Sage's exact identity and past remained shrouded in mystery, a detail they neither knew nor particularly sought to uncover.

Soon after, the Sage informed them of sightings in the capital of individuals resembling Nahan's comrades, and a wall marked with a signal exclusive to the Star of Nagran was discovered nearby.

"Nahan was searching for us... for the Sage as well," they realized.

Debate ensued over the trustworthiness of this information and whether it was a trap to capture the Sage. In the end, it was the Sage who volunteered to sacrifice himself.

"This man cares little for his own life. I simply wish to prevent Nahan from leading his brethren and all of the Star of Nagran into danger."

This declaration stirred respect and admiration among the young Awakeners. Langbarton was moved to near tears and renewed his vow to protect the Sage at all costs.

Thus, they left a new signal near the one left by Nahan's group.

Almost immediately, a response came from Nahan's side.

After several exchanges, they secretly agreed to meet at a new hideout, the date being today.

"There it is."

Tension mounted as they approached the new hideout. After learning of Nahan's infiltration, they had moved to this location, unfamiliar to most of them.

In the past, meeting comrades would have been a joyous occasion, but now, they couldn't shake off their anxiety.

‘We planned to arrive at the hideout first to confront them, but what if one of them has already snuck in there? It's unlikely, but... no, even if so, I don't believe we'd lose. Still... Damn! Diemon's nonsense is making me worry unnecessarily.’

Nahan had caused much disruption, fracturing the relationships among their southern base comrades and allowing a suspicious group to infiltrate.

Langbarton knew he could never forgive them if they threatened the Sage.

‘The Sage is too kind, always offering chances even to the likes of Nahan. But not me. That creature is the evil of our group. Even if not today, it must be eradicated.’

Initially, Langbarton hadn't felt so strongly, but over time, he and the other young Awakeners had grown increasingly wary and resentful of Nahan.

Unaware of the oddity of his feelings or that Diemon's premonition might not be entirely wrong, Langbarton took a deep breath. He looked around, half-expecting to find suspicious onlookers or enemies, but saw only ordinary passersby. After hearing a loud vendor hawking dried fruits outside a nearby fruit shop, Langbarton quietly entered the hideout.

“Ha, if it weren't for the pharmacist, we would've continued searching elsewhere, oblivious to their arrival here today.”

Beyond the lodgings where the Sage and the young Awakeners had entered, Devran Hartude, who had just been energetically attracting customers at the fruit store watched by Langbarton, set down the jar of dried apple preserves he had been holding.

In front of him stood Enon, pressing down his hat, appearing like a customer pondering whether to make a purchase.

Their presence there was not without reason. It was because Enon had brought news that 'Karl Enfile', an official who had vanished from the capital long ago, had suddenly reappeared.

Karl Enfile was a name presumed to belong to the Sage leading the Star of Nagran, before he became an Awakener. Having revealed himself after several years, he sought certain information from those he knew in the past, then departed once he received responses.

The information he sought pertained to the whereabouts of a suspicious and dangerous group roaming the capital, including a man bearing extensive burn scars on one side of his face.

The Sage began searching for the location of Nahan.

Having heard the tale from his trusted sources, Enon was certain of this.

Ideally, this news would have been first reported to Yuder, but he was in the south at the moment. Therefore, following the intelligence instructions Yuder had left before his departure, the remaining intelligence members gathered to collaborate upon hearing the news.

Enon had discovered more. He knew the location of a mysterious sentence someone had suddenly painted on a wall somewhere in the capital. Its meaning was difficult to grasp for those not affiliated with the Star of Nagran, but the Cavalry had Kanna, who could discern a wealth of information with a mere touch, and a few former Awakeners from the Star of Nagran.

"This was left on a day when dawn brought a light rain. So, three days ago. The one who painted this was engulfed in immense anxiety, vigilance, and suspicion. The meaning seems to indicate a rendezvous. Hmm. Are the Sage and Nahan planning to meet? The exact date isn't clear, but it might be best to ask Gayle and Doyle."

Following Kanna's advice, Gayle and Doyle, greeted with innocent faces by the intelligence members, joyfully examined the drawing presented to them.

"Oh, this drawing...! I've learned about it! The circles and sticks here indicate the number of days until the event, so five days! The sun symbol next to it means daytime. And below that is..."

According to what the brothers revealed, the Sage and Nahan were scheduled to meet today, right here.

And Devran, one of the intelligence members, realized that one of the stores where he had taken a job undercover for intelligence gathering was nearby, devising an excellent use for it.

"How fortunate that I've worked at this store. With winter approaching and less work, the owner had gone elsewhere, leaving the place deserted."

"Right. You were so dedicated to your side job that we thought you were about to quit the Cavalry. Who would have thought it'd come in handy here! We were really surprised."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

Behind Devran, who was boasting, Hinn and Finn, small enough to easily hide behind the stacked fruit boxes, suddenly stood up and teased him.

"Gakane! How's it over there? Can you manage?"

In contrast to the Eldore siblings, who were petite, Gakane, with his tall stature and strikingly handsome appearance, had no place to hide and was tucked away in a very small storeroom at the corner of the fruit store. He cracked the door open slightly and smiled sheepishly, his eyebrows softening. His clothes were covered in dust from how tightly he had squeezed himself in.

"Uh, I can manage. I'm alright."

Gakane could have hidden in the shadows for a brief respite, but this was an indefinite wait, preventing him from unnecessarily draining his strength. He enviously watched Enon, who, with a nonchalant face, intently gazed at the pickled lemons.

'Even the pharmacist is remarkably good-looking... Oddly, he doesn't seem to catch anyone's eye. Could that be some sort of trick or ability? I wish I could do the same.'

"Right. It's tough, but since Nahan hasn't arrived yet, just hold on a bit longer."

While the Eldore siblings were comforting Gakane, Enon, who had been silent until then, suddenly turned his head toward a certain direction.

"It looks like they're coming from over there."

"Where?"

Instead of answering, Enon gestured with his eyes. From not too far away, individuals with an unmistakably unusual aura emerged from an alley.

Recognizing the scar on the face of the man in the center, the Eldore siblings quickly ducked back behind the boxes. Gakane also vanished like the wind.

Devran, concealing his sharp gaze, resumed attracting customers with a smiling face.

"Oh, don't hesitate, take a jar with you. You know how staying indoors during winter can damage your skin and weaken your body? But eating these dried apple peel preserves regularly can prevent that. I'm not just trying to sell this, your complexion doesn't look good."

His earnest and unpretentious expression and voice somehow lent credibility to his words, even though they were the same as any other vendor. This knack for making his wares seem worth a try revealed why he was a favorite among the merchants.

"Wow, Devran. Maybe you should have been a trader?"

"Indeed."

As the Eldore siblings murmured among themselves, Nahan and his companions nonchalantly passed the fruit store.

Or so they intended.

"Really? Are these apple peel preserves that good? How much?"

Ironically, Devran's effective sales pitch caused one of Nahan's followers to stop in his tracks. Fortunately, the others passed by without pause, but Devran could feel the sweat running down his back.

Worried that Nahan might recognize him from the time he was trapped in the East, he had smeared his face with more soot than usual and even pressed down his hat, but it was hard to relax.

'Damn it. Should've just kept walking!'

"Yes, sir. Just three coins."

Long accustomed to shop work, his mouth and mind operated splendidly independently.

"Three? Seems a bit expensive..."

"It's because of the good quality jar. You can reuse it for something else."

"Hmm..."

"Pepp! What are you doing there? Hurry up!"

While the man hesitated, one of Nahan's companions called out from a short distance.

"I'll be right there!... Give me one of those."

Devran quickly handed over the apple preserves. As he did, Nahan, who had been standing still as if waiting for the man, smoothly turned his head.

They first knocked on the door of a brick house where the Sage's group had entered. Shortly after, the door opened, and everyone went inside.

"Phew!"

"Well done, Devran."

As Devran let out a deep sigh, his colleagues emerged from their hiding spots and praised him.

"I'm really curious about what those guys will talk about in there."

"How long should we wait before going in?"

As the Eldore siblings flashed dangerously twinkling eyes and smiled, Gakane calmly responded.

"Let's wait until Devran finishes tidying up and then approach."

However, they didn't get the chance to make their move. Just as Devran had finished organizing his makeshift shop and removed his apron, a loud explosion erupted from the house.

"Aaagh!"

As people screamed and ran, the intelligence members exchanged glances.

Chapter 688

A chorus of screams echoed as people fled in terror, their paths crisscrossing with the watchful eyes of the intelligence members.

It was Gakane Bolunwald who stepped forward first, breaking the silence. "There's no need to wait any longer," he declared firmly. "Hinn and Finn, assist the pharmacist and help evacuate the people. The city guards or knights will soon arrive, drawn by the commotion. Remember, those within are all Awakeners – it's our responsibility. We must immediately contact the Cavalry and His Majesty the Emperor."

In the past, the Eldore siblings would have protested, preferring the thrill of battle over the task of leading others to safety. But their separate experiences in the West had taught these sarcastic jesters the true value of their abilities and the importance of teamwork.

The siblings' power to teleport objects, even people, was invaluable in emergencies. Their extraordinary strength, while excellent in combat, shone equally in rescue efforts.

Although they might only begrudgingly admit it, Gakane Bolunwald was undeniably reliable in crises. Having led his companions through the perilous Great Sarain Forest, he had taken on the most challenging tasks, displaying his tenacity even in the face of death. His perseverance remained unaltered despite near-fatal encounters.

The Eldore siblings found Gakane somewhat pitiable yet admirable. He never sought an easy life despite his appealing appearance, earning their respect and perhaps that of Devran as well.

"Though Devran was once a proud and ambitious man, eager to take the lead. Seeing this, it's clear why Yuder wanted Gakane in the intelligence service first,' they mused.

"Alright. We'll do it," the Eldore siblings agreed without hesitation, prompting a brief, relieved smile from Gakane.

"Thank you. Then Devran, come with me!"

"Understood. Let's go!" Devran quickly followed Gakane.

"Pharmacist, we're off too!"

"But how will we inform the Cavalry? It's too far for a note, even with our powers."

"Don't worry about that. I'll handle it," Enon replied casually, eyes on the smoke billowing rooftops.

"How so?"

"I'll just grab someone nearby. There's bound to be someone around here who can deliver a message."

And Enon did just that. Spotting a fleeing errand boy from a nearby shop, he beckoned him over. The young man, recognizing Enon even in his flight, readily agreed to deliver a message to the Cavalry in the Seventh Wall District. He even took a moment to exchange pleasantries, delighted to see Enon after so long.

"Aren't you going to flee, Enon? What are you still doing here?"

"You haven't heard? I closed the pharmacy and joined the Cavalry as their medic."

"Really? I've been too busy lately to keep up... Do they pay well?"

"They pay well, but the work is relentless. Why, thinking of joining?"

The young man paused, momentarily forgetting the chaos around him, lost in thought. "It's tempting, but I'm not sure about the workload. I'll think about it. Anyway, I'll be off then!"

"Alright. If you can't go straight away, just grab anyone from the colleague and pass the message on. It needs to be delivered as quickly as possible."

"Don't worry. If it were a higher district, maybe, but I know a shortcut to Seventh Wall District. I'll be there in no time!"

With a sly grin, the young errand boy vanished swiftly. The Eldore siblings, having delegated a task, looked up at Enon with a mix of awe and curiosity.

"Pharmacist, what did you use to do? You have an impressive network."

Enon shrugged off their amazement. "Like you heard, I've just been selling medicines here for a long time. It's nothing extraordinary."

"How can it not be? Just selling medicines for a while doesn't grant everyone the speed of information exchange like this. Yuder wouldn't have recruited you into the intelligence service for that alone!"

"Who are the colleagues? People from an intelligence guild or something?"

"Wow. Normally, contacting such groups is no simple task. If that's true, could you be an intelligence guild heavyweight disguised as a pharmacist...?"

"Hmm! It's possible."

The rascals' eyes sparkled with curiosity, but Enon remained unresponsive. Instead, he pointed towards a nearby fallen individual and gestured with his head.

"Instead of wasting time with pointless chatter, why don't you go and help that person over there?"

The Eldore siblings' attempt to probe further into Enon's identity was swiftly thwarted. Grumbling under their breath, they quickly set to work, calming the panicked crowd and moving them to safety.

Enon continued to gaze intently at a brick house from which unsettling noises emanated. Though he appeared to be doing nothing, his eyes were busily scanning the surroundings.

'It's been a while since I've seen such strong energies converging and churning within the capital. The malevolence emanating is too intense. Fortunately, the response has been swift enough that I don't need to intervene defensively, but considering that such incidents might increase...'

Lost in thought, Enon let out a long sigh.

'Right now, it's just this, but what about the times I don't know about?'

'That time' referred to an era Enon could only guess at, a past and a future that existed only for Yuder Aile, who was not present in the capital.

Since coming to believe that Yuder Aile hailed from the future, Enon often pondered those times. Yuder's reticence to speak in detail suggested a tumultuous past. The mere hint that Enon himself had been absent was enough to conjure numerous dreadful possibilities.

But what about now? All the measures Yuder had prepared before his departure were currently safeguarding the capital.

Enon turned his gaze southward. Beyond the clear sky, he knew, was where Yuder currently resided.

'Always causing headaches. He leaves all these bothersome tasks! If he returns even slightly more injured than when he left, I won't let him off easy!'

...

Yuder, feeling an odd chill, turned his head towards the source. All he saw to the north were birds flying leisurely outside the open window of the southern branch.

"What's the matter, Yuder? Is there someone there? Perhaps a bold fan climbed the wall to catch a glimpse of the western hero?"

"Hardly likely. Seems the window has been open for too long. It's getting a bit chilly; I'll close it."

Keenly perceptive, Kishiar noticed Yuder's reaction almost instantly and asked in a playful tone. Yuder shook his head and closed the window.

"Even in the south, winter is winter. We must be cautious. Come over here."

After a tumultuous day, the southern branch was busier than ever. It was teeming with visitors to the point of overcrowding. While interrogating those they had apprehended, the members of the southern branch, overwhelmed by countless protestors, barely had time to breathe. Yet, for Kishiar and Yuder, a brief respite was granted.

The man who had called Yuder over seated him in a plush chair and leaned against his shoulder. Yuder, wordlessly, used the power of the wind to toss a magic stone toward the magic-stone stove nearby. Multicolored flames burst forth, intensifying the crackling sound.

"Most of those we rescued yesterday expressed a desire to join the Cavalry," he noted. "Some wish to return to their hometowns, and we plan to support them in that."

"That's good to hear. It seems right to grant their wishes."

"Indeed. We shall proceed with that. As for Cyregina..."

Just then, a knocking sound interrupted them.

"Commander, a guest has arrived."

Chapter 689

"Commander, a guest has arrived."

'A guest? Who could it be?'

This was right after the literal destruction of the betting arena. Those who would visit had already frequented the southHerne branch of the Cavalry, marking their presence.

Among them were prominent figures: the head of Charloin's security, the haughty servant sent by the Lord of Charloin, those who protested for the release of gamblers caught on-site. Especially noisy were the representatives from the families of these VIPs. Countless others had knocked, seeking an audience with Commander Kishiar La Orr, who had suddenly appeared.

However, most were turned away under the pretext that the Commander was 'exhausted after a big task'. It was frustrating, but what could be done? They couldn't afford to offend him, especially when their weaknesses were now in his grasp.

This tactic had been effectively used by Kishiar previously at the illegal auction in Tainu in the West, quieting the protesting nobles. It seemed even more effective now.

'I guess they saw what happened to Baron Willhem of Tainu. One wrong move and they could end up utterly destroyed, just like him.'

Baron Willhem, once the lord of Tainu, had faced utter ruin. Despite his long service to the Duke of Tainu, he was abandoned in his most desperate hour.

Yuder knew that Willhem had been stripped of his title, noble rights, and his properties confiscated. He faced 15 years of imprisonment, 30 years of forced labor, and a fine of three million gold coins.

With no other way to reduce his sentence, Willhem turned to implicate others, including his brother, family, surrounding nobles, and the Duke of Tain.

Such actions were disgraceful for most nobles, but Willhem was cunningly persuaded by the first and second children of Tain, Pruelle and Priscilla.

'They'll promise a lighter sentence and his family's safety in exchange for a definitive end to their father. Not a bad strategy. Beneficial for both Tain and the Emperor, as well as us.'

Despite his vile life, Willhem hoped for his daughters' safety. Hence, their trial was still ongoing.

Initially, the entire nation was abuzz with a noble Duke, one of the four ducal families, being on trial before a judge. However, as the situation evolved, it was perceived as an internal power struggle within the Tain family.

If the Emperor and the Cavalry were seen attacking the Tain family, the nobility would resist. But if it seemed like an internal dispute gone awry, the story changed.

The longer the trial dragged on, the more the public would lose interest. This would give Priscilla, the heir, time to solidify her support. When the time was right, the Duke of Tain would face severe punishment without anyone to defend him.

This was the outcome of a political agreement between Pruelle, Priscilla, Emperor Keilusa, and Commander Kishiar. The trial might take months or years, but the wait was worth ensuring their victory.

‘But ordinary nobles would not know so much.’

In the minds of the nobles of Charloin, only Baron Willhem, who had met his downfall at the hands of the Cavalry, would have left a lasting impression.

‘So, the more they have to hide, the more likely they are to turn back when they hear from Kishiar that he’s tired... The fact that they sent a notification of a guest's arrival means the other side didn't care about it.’

"Even though I sent word that I was too tired to see anyone, they still wish to see me?"

The Kishiar by Yuder's side asked with a look that shared the same thought. A response came from beyond the door, breaking the brief silence.

"Yes. They insist on seeing you right now."

"What is their name?"

"They said they couldn't tell us. Only that you would know them if I mentioned the 'Owner of the Dawn'."

Kishiar's eyes sparkled briefly upon hearing these somewhat cryptic words.

"It must be someone from the House of Herne."

"The House of Herne, you say? Why... Ah."

Just as the question was about to be asked, the answer dawned.

‘The House of Herne is the family of Her Majesty the Empress. The Empress Palace is known as the Dawn Palace... So that's why they used that term.’

"Let them in."

"Understood."

Kishiar straightened up from leaning on Yuder's shoulder, while Yuder himself stood up and moved a step back to his rightful place behind the man. Kishiar clicked his tongue in apparent disappointment.

"I thought I might get a little rest, but it seems there's no time for that."

"Could it be someone from the Herne family... Did the Lord of Charloin summon them?"

"Although the Lord here is of the Herne family's collateral line, I doubt that's the case."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because they mentioned the 'Owner of the Dawn'."

As Kishiar spoke, the door opened and a person entered. Removing their luxurious traveler's robe, platinum blonde hair, nearly identical to the Empress's, cascaded down.

At first glance, the lady appeared nobly raised. Her strong features could intimidate the viewer, yet the freckles around her eyes and lips softened the harshness. The riding outfit she wore under her robe suited her perfectly.

Yuder recognized her immediately upon her arrival.

'Myra El Herne.'

Yuder had seen her in his previous life. She was the candidate for Empress from the Herne family, proposed to Emperor Katchian.

Emperor Katchian, an adopted son, had ascended to the throne unusually quickly after only a few years as the Crown Prince, becoming Emperor without having had an Empress to be. Of course, there were whispers during his time as Crown Prince, but Emperor Keilusa's early demise reset everything to a blank slate.

The four great ducal houses fiercely contested who would sit beside the Emperor. The Diarca family naturally proposed someone from their line, while the other three houses openly criticized Diarca's excessive greed and nominated their own candidates.

Among them, the Herne family boldly proposed a direct descendant, with clear logic.

'The previous Empress was not truly our making. Herne suffered greatly due to her extravagance and various incidents, and we have struggled to cope ever since, so it is only right to give us another chance.'

Despite various events, it seemed Diarca eventually stepped back, allowing Myra El Herne to become the Empress. Naturally, her marriage to the Emperor was anything but smooth.

For reasons unknown, Emperor Katchian had suffered wounds on the night of his wedding in the Empress's Palace, similar to those of claw marks. Hushed rumors circulated the palace, suggesting a physical altercation between the two.

Thereafter, he never visited the Empress's Palace again. Whenever advised to produce an heir, he would erupt in anger, accusing the adviser of harboring treasonous intentions due to his youth.

The House of Herne was displeased, but the House of Diarca and other families were quite satisfied. This situation allowed them to propose their own candidates for the position of concubine or legal wife.

After Emperor Katchian began to cunningly assassinate or manipulate the power holders of other families, including the House of Diarca, Empress Myra's situation worsened. Since she was out of favor with the Emperor and virtually exiled, no one dared to visit her.

The Empress's Palace was always famously quiet, as if empty.

No one knew how she lived there.

Yuder, too, had almost never seen her until his death.

'I never expected to see her here again.'

To be honest, until just moments ago, he had nearly forgotten her name. But upon seeing her face, the memories of her from the wedding resurfaced vividly.

Kishiar, noticing Yuder's subtly furrowed brow and blinking, glanced at him discreetly yet keenly before turning his head with a smile.

"Well, this is a surprise, such an illustrious guest has graced us with their presence."

"You must have known I would come, yet you jest so well."

Myra El Herne retorted coldly.

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"Well, this is a surprise, such an illustrious guest has graced us with their presence."

"You must have known I would come, yet you jest so well."

Myra El Herne retorted coldly.

"No, truly, I had no idea. Knowing this is the Herne's front yard, I anticipated someone from your side would come, but to have the First Princess herself as the first visitor, and unannounced at that, changes the story."

Kishiar's words slightly moved Myra's eyebrows.

"I regret not being able to inform you before my visit. But considering the Duke himself stirred a massive storm in Charloin without any forewarning, a bit of rudeness on my part might be understandable, don't you think?"

Her words were cleverly crafted. While acknowledging her own fault, she subtly referenced the sudden turmoil caused by Kishiar and the Cavalry. The word 'storm' she deliberately chose seemed like a reprimand but actually conveyed admiration, softening the mood.

That single phrase gave Yuder much insight about her.

Firstly, she was certainly not just a delicately raised noble lady.

Her demeanor felt more direct than expected.

And most importantly... it seemed she bore no anger or malice in her approach.

'So this is the kind of person she is.'

Previously, there hadn't been a chance to understand her character, making this interaction surprisingly refreshing.

"So, you're saying you're here not because of that 'storm'?"

"Officially, yes. Among the idiots caught by the Cavalry was a relative of mine."

Myra used the harsh term 'idiots' nonchalantly, her expression unchanging, showing her sincerity.

Kishiar's eyes deepened with interest.

"And unofficially?"

"Frankly, what the Cavalry does with that idiot is none of my concern. My urgency stemmed from feeling the need to meet and converse with the Duke and the Cavalry before the Second Prince."

"If it's just a family issue, it seems unnecessary for our Cavalry to intervene. Why must we have this conversation now?"

"Hern is currently deliberating how to handle the Cavalry in light of this incident. While some believe we should use this opportunity to eradicate the troublemakers in the South, others strongly oppose such action. I am among those who advocate for cooperation."

"Hmm. All I did was destroy one fighting ring that mistreated the Awakeners, and yet everyone is taking it so seriously. We're already busy recruiting new members. Why not just leave things as they are, as we have been? I'm not particularly concerned about the 'troublemakers in the South' or anything of that sort."

Kishiar shrugged nonchalantly, laughing like a carefree man, seemingly uninterested in the serious matter Myra presented.

Myra's eyes fleetingly showed surprise, perhaps not expecting such a response. It seemed she expected her straightforward offer of alliance would be immediately welcomed.

'She's not adept at hiding her intentions or political maneuvering. Considering her age, that's expected.'

Among the young nobles of the four great ducal houses they had met so far, Pruelle and Priscilla from Tain house were the smartest and strongest in cool-headed responses. The Apeto brothers were mostly emotional and sinister, except for the gentle and kind Revlin. And Diarca's Kiolle... was embarrassingly foolish compared to the others.

'But showing just enough of her intentions can sometimes make it easier for us to understand and deal with the situation.'

Yuder thought this as he scrutinized Kishiar's face.

It seemed unlikely that Kishiar intended to reject Myra. If they could cooperate with Myra, it would be beneficial for their future endeavors.

However, from Myra's words alone, it appeared as though Herne and Cavalry weren't collaborating, but rather, Herne was subtly offering a hand to let Cavalry handle their long-standing problems. That probably was the issue.

Cavalry couldn't appear as merely assisting Herne. Cooperation should be a process where both parties present their desires and work together as equals. The young First Princess of Herne, desiring to cooperate with the Cavalry, needed to realize this first.

Now, how would the not-yet-twenty-year-old First Princess of Herne react? If she was driven by emotion, she would leave in a cold huff. If reason prevailed, she would make a different decision. Yuder gazed intently at Myra's face.

"...I don't think that's what Cavalry wants."

After a moment, Myra's response leaned towards the latter.

"Hmm? How would the Princess know what Cavalry wants?"

"Before coming here, I researched how Cavalry handled this incident. You must have realized from the trapped Awakeners that this wasn't the only fighting ring. Considering Cavalry's past actions, it's unlikely you would stop after just one. You must be planning the next move, aren't you?"

Despite Kishiar's seemingly casual counter-question, Myra answered confidently. Her arrival here in less than a day was impressive enough, but having also grasped Cavalry's operations in that time was quite a feat. And her assumption about their next plan was correct.

"Then?"

"This time, no one suspected Duke Peletta's presence here, so you could resolve it through infiltration. But now that everything is exposed, others will try their best to hide. Without the cooperation of someone well-acquainted with this place, it might be difficult for you to proceed as you wish. If you give me the chance to cooperate, I swear I will do my utmost to assist."

"..."

"Let me be more frank. The truth is, if Cavalry steps in and I can assist, it would be a great benefit to me personally. Dealing with the nuisances of the south is what I've been most diligently working on as a potential heir of Herne."

Myra was no fool either. Clearly stating that this situation was definitely beneficial for her implied, 'there's no need to suspect any ulterior motives for my offer to cooperate.' She also decidedly lowered her stance, positioning herself as someone assisting Cavalry, not the other way around.

"But I'm not the only one thinking this. My biggest competitor, the Second Child Ashrav, likely has the same idea. If he collaborates with Cavalry first, it wouldn't make much difference to Herne and the south, but it would be a fatal loss for me personally. Therefore... I am determined to cooperate with Cavalry first in handling this matter."

"So, in essence, you want to aid Cavalry's efforts to gain an advantage in the succession competition."

"That's right."

Having said that, Myra bowed her head.

"I assume you are already aware, having heard from the owner of the Dawn Palace, but the succession struggle of Herne has been ongoing for a long time, ever since I was born. I have long hoped for her support, and we have been in contact for a while, yet I have not received a clear answer. I cannot hide the fact that my eagerness for this cooperation to succeed partly stems from the hope that it might also secure her support."

She hadn't told everything, but what she had shared was enough for one to infer her circumstances.

'It seems the issue of succession is a problem everywhere.'

Kishiar looked at Myra, her face wrapped in a cold tension, and smiled inscrutably.

"Hmm... I have just one question."

"Yes?"

"What if, even after hearing all this, we decide to cooperate with the Second Child, who might come seeking us later, instead of the First Princess?"

For a moment, Myra's expression hardened. She looked at Kishiar with a gaze sharp enough to pierce, and spoke coldly.

"A truly sad hypothesis. Even so, if it benefits Herne and the South, I must endure it. However, I doubt there is anyone else who knows this place better than I do. Perhaps, for a task that could have been easily resolved, the Cavalry will end up taking a very long and roundabout route."

Her voice was almost threatening. The atmosphere turned icy, and a silence ensued.

It was Kishiar's laughter that broke the silence.

"Hahaha, they say the First Princess of Herne, born for the first time in 35 years, is full of the true spirit of a daughter of Herne. Indeed, it seems so. I understand. May I take a day to think it over and then contact you?"

Myra looked at him, her eyes filled with astonishment, but soon she nodded.

"Yes. I will be waiting."

She seemed to regard Kishiar as a very strange man. Yet, her demeanor remained unchanged until she left.