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"So, what is it that you wish to tell us?"

"I propose a collaboration. I will guide and assist you, and in return, you stop pursuing my brethren."

"We refuse."

Yuder's response was cold and swift. Despite the man's purported sacrificial stance for his subordinates, Yuder didn't sense a shred of noble determination or the caution of a negotiator from him. And why should he accept the proposal of a seemingly tricky fellow without a compelling reason?

Nevertheless, despite the chilly refusal, the man merely tugged at one corner of his lips, showing no signs of defeat or despair.

"Rather blunt. But that's to be expected if you're still unfamiliar with the obstinacy and arrogance of the Eastern nobles. Even if you were on an imperial mandate, it wouldn't be easy here. How fast do you think you can achieve your goal among yourselves? In my opinion, it seems impossible."

"Do you know something more?"

"If you're curious, accept my proposal."

"..."

"There will be no harm to you, I promise."

Even in this unfavorable situation, his audacity clearly stemmed from a confidence in something.

If it had been up to Yuder, he would have thrashed the man soundly and forced the truth out of him, but this tactic worked with some and not with others. And, unfortunately, Yuder's instinct told him that this man would not be swayed by such an approach.

'If Kishiar was here instead of me...'

Yuder suddenly thought of the absent Kishiar. Kishiar might have left this man to his devices, just to see what he would do out of pure curiosity. That was his way.

His method was risky, but it had definite advantages. When confident in superior power, there was no better way to obtain information.

'And this mission is an exploration mission. It has always been my weak point.'

Yuder made a decision. Whatever abilities the man in front of him might have, Yuder did not sense that he was stronger. If it was within tolerable limits, it might be okay to mimic Kishiar just once and follow the man's lead.

"Fine."

"Yuder?"

Gakane was startled by the short agreement that followed a lengthy silence and called Yuder's name. He had naturally expected Yuder to refuse the man's proposal. Yuder gestured to reassure him before continuing.

"Do as you wish. You'd probably follow us anyway, even if we refused."

"You've caught on. You're right."

The man with the odd scar smiled calmly and nodded.

"But before that, tell me the real reason why you'll try to follow us and what the Eastern nobles are hiding."

"Impatient, aren't we?"

"If I don't like the preliminary information, I'll arrest you on the spot and turn you over to the guards."

"You seem to have done quite a bit of threatening. Fine. Mutual trust is important, after all."

With those words, the man raised his hand lightly, swirling the air.

Suddenly, the atmosphere around them changed dramatically as if a veil had been lifted, revealing the true sky. Beneath the brightly shining moon and stars, a peaceful mountain landscape appeared. A new horse that had not been visible before was quietly tied to a tree, grazing on the grass.

The man effortlessly loosed the reins of the bound horse and climbed upon it. Everyone was unable to contain their astonishment at such a natural display.

"The sky has suddenly cleared! The horse too... Is this that man's power?"

"Little brother is smarter than he looks."

The man answered in a low voice, understanding Jimmy's question, whispered to Yuder, loud and clear.

"Exactly as you said. This is indeed my power."

"...An illusion?"

Yuder asked quietly. The man nodded, a gleam passing over his seemingly ordinary eyes.

"Yes. It's not as impressive as your abilities, but it has various uses. Thanks to this power, despite my appearance, I can be free anywhere and quickly notice when guests like you arrive."

His explanation was ambiguous, but they could guess what he meant. His illusionary ability exceeded merely hiding his grotesque appearance, it was exceptional enough to cover an entire area and detect those who intruded upon it.

Yuder had met a few illusion-casters in his past life. However, their abilities were not as exceptional as the man before him. He wondered if the individuals possessing such a level of skill had met an early death while hanging out with bandits in his previous life.

"So, you were so confident because you thought you could escape anytime. Even knowing what your ability is, it would be difficult to detect it... troublesome."

Gakane also seemed to understand the hidden intent in the man's words, murmuring with a grimace on his face.

"Now, let's discuss the details while on our way. It's not far to the village, but it would be best to get there as soon as possible."

At the man's suggestion, Yuder quietly climbed onto a horse. Gakane and Jimmy also mounted horses. They followed the leisurely advancing man, without letting their guard down.

"Among my brothers, there was one originally in charge of visiting the village to keep tabs on the situation and buy food supplies. However, some time ago, this brother headed to the village as usual but didn't return. The other brothers thought he had run away with the money for the food, but I didn't think so."

The voice of the scarred man was surprisingly clear, audible even amidst the rustling wind in the dark and the noise of the horses' hooves against the ground.

"That brother was surely caught. But I couldn't save him until now because I didn't know where he was imprisoned. Not until the person you are looking for came here."

"What does that have to do with it?"

Jimmy bravely frowned and asked his question.

"The old lord and the couple who had visited to receive their title early died in a fire that day. Despite such a big incident, the remaining two sons have yet to report it to the capital. The whole village is buzzing that the man you're looking for will soon be executed, but no one knows where he's imprisoned. His family members also disappeared somewhere after that day, but no one talks about it. Don't you think that's strange?"

"...Does it mean that someone deliberately confined them somewhere and is trying to quietly bury the incident?"

When Yuder asked curtly, the man turned to look back at him.

"In the east, they respect the House of Duke Diarca more than the emperor."

His answer flowed out, seeming a bit irrelevant.

"Did you know that ever since rumors spread that the recent Emperor had his younger brother form a Cavalry, persecutions against the Awakeners have intensified in the East? That there has been an increase in cases where Awakeners of commoner origin, possessing notable abilities, were suddenly framed and unjustly imprisoned? No one knows where they've gone."

"I haven't heard of such things happening around here before I left for the test! Of course, unlike the capital, there were many people here who were afraid of the Awakeners..."

"Jimmy."

Yuder called out Jimmy's name curtly, compelling him to close his mouth. But the man had already turned his attention to Jimmy.

"Just because you're from here, it doesn't mean you know everything. Especially a young boy like you, your exposure to information is limited. But were your parents also like that?"

At the man's words, Jimmy's expression changed instantly.

"What do you mean?"

"Usually, no matter how strong they are, they wouldn't send a young child alone to such a distant place. But what if they thought it was more dangerous to stay here than going to the capital."

His low voice sent a strong ripple through everyone's minds.

"Was it the little brother's decision to take the Cavalry test? Or was it instigated by the parents' suggestion? What did they say to do if you failed the exam? Did they tell you to come right back? If it were me, I would have asked someone I know to look after you, and told you to stay there for a while."

"..."

Yuder read the shock in Jimmy's open mouth and trembling eyes. It suggested that the man's conjecture wasn't too far from the truth.

"I'm not lying. After I came here, in a few months, the East became increasingly hard for people like us to live. Many of my brethren have fled here like that."

Yuder thought about the man's mention of the 'East, where the influence of the Diarca Ducal House is stronger than the Emperor.'

The history of the repeated rivalry and alliance between the Imperial House of the Orr Empire and the Four Ducal Houses was exceedingly long. When the imperial authority was strong, the power of the ducal houses weakened, and vice versa.

In his past life, the Emperor Yuder served as a foster son of the Diarca Ducal House, so he did not antagonize the ducal houses. But what about the current Emperor?

If Kishiar had judged that the power of the Cavalry created was beneficial to the Emperor, the Four Ducal Houses would have worked to obstruct it.

Could the sudden arrest of Devran, a member of the cavalry, here be related to that? He would have to meet Devran to be sure, but it seemed a high probability.

'In my previous life, there was no general vacation at this time, and Devran didn't disappear, so I couldn't have known that such a thing was happening in the East.'

"I think there's a high chance that the one you're looking for is being held in the same place as my brother, or at least knows something that could be a clue."

The man finished his story saying he had followed Yuder and the Cavalry members for that reason. Yuder felt that he wasn't lying, but he didn't let down his guard.

The cold, chilling gaze that did not hide even when he called everyone with the same power a brother, was not to his liking. Was his reason for taking the risk to join them really just because of his comrades?

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Yuder's gaze drifted towards the small birdcage hanging next to his horse. It seemed he might have to send a courier to Kishiar more swiftly than he'd initially thought upon arriving in the village.

"Your Grace, a courier has just arrived from the East," a voice informed him.

"Is it from the Lord of Hartan?"

"No, it's a report from our spy in a nearby village."

Seated at his desk, buried in paperwork filled with complex laws, Kishiar finally shifted his gaze to his adjutant, Nathan.

"A report?"

"Do you remember when you ordered me to recruit several spies in the East to monitor the long-term movements there? One of them. I inquired if he knew anything about this matter and the answer came quickly."

Kishiar had not taken lightly the fact that a Cavalry member, originally from the East and on leave, had not yet returned. The East, where the Ducal faction was gaining ground, had been subtly pushing back against the Awakeners ever since Kishiar expressed his desire to form the Cavalry.

While the incident was likely minor, there was a possibility that some foolish noble had insulted the Cavalry member, and by extension, Kishiar and the Emperor.

For this reason, he had instructed Nathan to investigate all possible leads for information, beyond the direct letter he sent to the Lord of Hartan. The reply from the Lord of Hartan was yet to arrive, but the answer from another source came unexpectedly quickly, which did not sit well with Kishiar.

Kishiar broke the seal on the letter Nathan handed to him and read it quickly. His red eyes cooled significantly after a moment.

"So, there's been a fire."

"...In Hartan?"

"Yes, and it's rumored that the Lord's castle burned completely. The timing coincides with Devran Hartude's stay in Hartan. Might be a coincidence, but we can't be sure."

"But there was no report from the Black Pigeon about this."

Of the countless events that occurred daily across the country, disasters were critical reports that needed immediate communication.

If a fire severe enough to consume the entire Lord's castle had occurred, naturally, an immediate report should have reached the capital administration via couriers. Yet, even their spies in nearby villages didn't know the extent of the casualties; something was suspicious.

One could argue that the delay in handling the incident caused the report to be late. Still, Kishiar remembered that Devran Hartude had the power to conjure fire.

"Oh, another courier has arrived."

At that moment, Nathan, standing by the window, caught another small bird that had flown in.

"Is it from Hartan?"

"I'm sorry, but it isn't. It's a letter from another spy in the East."

"What does it say?"

Kishiar asked his adjutant to read out the new message. As Nathan unfolded the small pouch tied to the bird's leg and read the letter, his expression shifted slightly.

"It's an irregular report unrelated to the current incident. It says that ten Imperial Knights have come to train at Mount Clayman."

"Isn't Mount Clayman near Hartan?"

Kishiar's memory, which had the entire continental map memorized, was unquestionably flawless.

"Indeed it is. And among the knights who went for training this time, it seems Kiolle da Diarca is present."

Kishiar's handsome lips curled into a subtle smirk.

"Huh. Is that scoundrel there? I thought he'd learned a lesson after getting scolded by my assistant, but it seems that wasn't the case?"

Kiolle da Diarca was the youngest son of Duke Diarca, who had spoiled him so much that he didn't listen to anyone and earned a notorious reputation. The Duke arranged a place for his youngest son in the Imperial Knight to lead a comfortable life, but this hope was beautifully shattered with the recent formation of the Cavalry.

Kiolle, who was humiliated for the first time in his life by a common-born Cavalry member, Yuder Aile, in the training field, could not contain his fury and contacted Kishiar numerous times. The calls were almost threats, demanding immediate expulsion of the audacious Cavalry member and sending him to the Diarca family.

Of course, Kishiar ignored all of it. Just when he thought the matter was finally settled and forgotten, a few days ago, Yuder once again encountered Kiolle and bestowed upon him an even greater insult.

Assuming that there would be another round of complaints, but receiving none, Kishiar thought Kiolle had finally learned some humility. However, it appeared that Duke Diarca had simply intervened, sending his son away for training.

"Predictable. The old man must have sent him away to cool his head, given all the trouble he's causing."

"Do you think the Duke knew something when he sent him?"

"If he had known anything, that old man Duke Diarca would never have sent Kiolle there, Nathan."

Unlike the cautious question from Nathan, Kishiar's answer was bitterly sarcastic.

"He may have lost a few teeth due to old age, but an old lion is still a lion. The person who best understands his youngest son's abilities, coldly and clearly, is none other than himself."

"Still, if they happen to meet again at that place... I'm not sure it will turn out well this time."

There was no telling what would happen if, by any chance, Yuder and Kiolle were to encounter each other again in the eastern region, where the reach of the Duke's family was strong. It seemed like a great misfortune.

When Nathan voiced his slight concern, Kishiar shook his head.

"There's no need to worry about my assistant, even if something happens. ...What's more concerning is the report about the fire."

"I'll look into that further."

"Do that. And Nathan, be prepared to go there at any moment if necessary."

"Do you want me to deliver the message personally?"

At the unexpected command, Nathan's eyes narrowed.

"Yes. It's better not to go, but just in case, we need to be prepared."

"Understood."

The loyal adjutant did not ask for reasons.

"Now, let's call upon the mages who have been on their feet all day."

Kishiar realized that the fact Thais Yulman and his disciple could come here was due to the information leaked by Duke Diarca. The fact that they simply provided information to the mages of the Pearl Tower, who didn't have much connection with the Duke's family, meant they didn't show much interest in the power of the Red Stone.

'Fortunate, indeed.'

All the nobles knew that the Emperor's health was deteriorating day by day. If they knew that Kishiar and the Emperor were hoping for a miracle through the unknown power within the Red Stone, the dukes would have done whatever it took to eliminate it. Or, knowing the power of the stone, they would have sent a perfect spy who would be prepared to die to report to the dukes.

In this regard, the deep-seated character of a true mage in Thais Yulman, who had come here, was quite fortunate for Kishiar. Thais was a leading authority in such research, and he was stubborn enough to willingly finger his pledge that he would keep his mouth shut forever as long as he could conduct his research.

Perhaps Duke Diarca had leaked the information thinking that Thais would investigate the Red Stone and eavesdrop on the news he would send to the Pearl Tower. But did he really expect that Thais would pledge to keep his mouth shut so easily and even bear a grudge against his youngest son?

Kishiar felt quite pleased when he thought about how the Duke would react when he found out about this later.

The face of Yuder Aile, who suggested using Thais, came to mind. His assistant seemed to have a great talent for ruining what the greedy Dukes wanted. It was a skill he liked.

"Once we pass through the guards you see over there, we'll be in Hartan."

The man with a scar on his face paused as he gestured towards the guards positioned not far off. Behind the stone wall and the watchtower they were guarding, the outline of a village could be seen just as he had described. Yuder stepped forward, leading the group towards the guards.

“Who are you?”

“We are Cavalry members who have been dispatched by Duke Kishiar La Orr Peletta, the Commander of the Cavalry.”

“The Cavalry?”

For a moment, Yuder noticed a heavy wariness pass over the faces of the guards.

“...Show us some evidence to verify your identity.”

“Here it is.”

Yuder produced the identity certificate he had received from Kishiar. After reading the paper several times with a cautious gaze, the guard returned it with a heavy voice.

“So it is. Seems correct. Four people, correct?”

Their gaze swept over Yuder and the others behind him. Yuder assumed that the guards would certainly be startled at the sight of the man with a huge scar on his face, but their expressions were remarkably calm.

Finding this strange, Yuder turned around and was surprised to see the face of the man standing behind Gakane and Jimmy had transformed into someone else's.

While the man still had a noticeable scar, his handsome face had disappeared, and instead, the average face of one of the bandits they had encountered on the mountain and fled from was there. Moreover, he was wearing a cavalry uniform identical to Yuder's.

It looked no different from the real thing, but it was definitely a form made by overlaying an illusion.

'Using illusion abilities like this.'

The man smiled slightly as his eyes met Yuder's. It seemed that there was no need to worry about the scar on his face thanks to the ability to show illusions, and indeed, it was a remarkable skill. If he hadn't seen and heard of his abilities beforehand, he might have suspected him to be a shape-shifter.

"...Yes. Four people. Correct."

"And your purpose?"

"We wish to meet and speak with the Lord."

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Yuder had purposefully obscured his true intentions. His original aim was to find traces of Devran Hartude, but to do that, he needed to meet the Lord anyway. This question could also confirm the extent to which the information given by the bandit was true.

Sure enough, the expressions of the guards darkened instantly, suggesting Yuder was not wrong in his thinking.

"You seem to have come from afar and have not heard the news yet. Our lord passed away in an accident a few days ago."

"Is that so? Then, who is currently in charge of the village?"

"The Lord's eldest daughter, Lady Sabelrina, and her husband, Sir Ryel, also met with misfortune on the same day... Currently, the youngest son, Lord Zakail, is taking care of the funeral arrangements and the aftermath."

"Then, I must meet him."

"Please do so. In fact, today is the last day of the funeral, and all the villagers are finishing the rites at the back of the mountain. You should find them there. Ah, and before that, outsiders are required to leave their horses at our stables. Please hand over your reins."

The guard returned Yuder's identification. They watched, their eyes full of suspicion, as Yuder pocketed his ID.

Yuder watched as Gakane and Jimmy handed over their reins to the guards, and then he carefully opened the door of the small birdcage hanging from his saddle.

Feeling the gaze of the bandit leader on him as he took out the small bird and turned it over his shoulder, Yuder sensed a curiosity about what he might do next.

Ignoring the man's gaze, Yuder quickly conjured up a dust storm. As the gritty wind blew dirt onto the faces of the guards, startled voices echoed from all directions.

"Damn, what is this?"

Taking advantage of the moment when the guards closed or covered their faces, Yuder released his messenger bird. The bird, trained to fly around for a day without a letter and then return, would be back by the time Yuder called for it within a day.

'Even if they see the birdcage, they'd realize it had a messenger bird. But there's nothing I can do about it.'

As he passed the guard post and entered the outskirts of the village, the first thing he noticed was the heavy smell of burnt wood that pricked his nostrils.

Yuder picked up a stick from the ground and lit it. He could have conjured fire with magic, but using a torch would raise less suspicion should he encounter anyone.

Under the flickering torchlight, the sight of scorched earth and burnt plants confirmed the truth of the rumor that half the village had been set ablaze.

"Over there, is that the castle?"

Unable to hide his anxious voice, Jimmy whispered to Yuder and pointed at something black in the distance. It wasn't very large, but it was unmistakably a castle. The sight of its excessively dark silhouette in the night provoked an eerie sensation.

"There really is no one in the village. They must all have gone to the back mountain."

"That over there looks like a cornfield... It's all burnt. It's the harvest season now..."

As Gakane mumbled, scanning the surroundings, Jimmy added another comment, looking at the blackened field. Yuder turned his head towards the bandit leader, who was quietly walking. The man was still wearing the image of his subordinate in military uniform.

"How long do you plan to keep this charade?"

"Isn't it strange if I'm the only one dressed differently? I know it's uncomfortable, but maintaining this guise is to lessen the suspicion and wariness you all might incur."

In response to Yuder's question, the bandit leader calmly retorted. He certainly had a way with words.

"If you're so thoughtful, why not tell us your name?"

"You're asking that now?"

He had been wondering when the question would come. With a mumble, the man's gaze landed on Yuder's face.

"Nahan."

Whether it was his real name or an alias, Yuder didn't know. However, he decided to include it in the report he would send to Kisiar.

They continued to walk into the depths of the village, where no one was in sight. Upon arrival, it was more than a simple village; compared to the size of the actual territory, the area inhabited by people was quite small.

As they passed the charred windmill, drawing closer to the castle, the smell of burning became more intense. The road was littered with black ash and burnt fields not yet cleared away.

"With damage this severe... I imagine there were many casualties."

"There were hardly any, besides the lord and his wife who died in the castle. Especially outside the castle, there were none."

Grasping Gakane's muttering, Nahan promptly responded, which earned him a suspicious look from Jimmy.

"How do you know that so well?"

"Using this ability, it's not difficult to enter the castle and hear the stories firsthand."

With an ability to overlay the exact face of someone else as an illusion, it would have been easy for him to blend in among the castle's servants. Yuder began to surmise how Nahan had obtained his information.

'In other words, despite having such an ability, he couldn't find the whereabouts of his missing comrade and Devran.'

Why did a noble need to keep such a secret while handling a few commoner prisoners? It was a strange thing. Yuder felt as if he understood why the man was so invested in this. Even he, Yuder, would have done the same. Yuder lifted his head towards the lost-in-thought Nahan.

"How long can you maintain your ability?"

"I'd like to say it's a secret... but it's not as short as you might worry. It can last a few days as long as I don't exhaust myself."

Upon hearing the word "days," Gakane's expression turned odd. He too could maintain his shadow clone for as long as he wished. However, illusions were more complicated to manage than clones. It felt strange to verify that a man who used to be a bandit possessed such extraordinary skills.

"Who goes there!"

Just as Yuder was about to ask Nahan something else, someone shouted with a full measure of wariness.

In the darkness, a few men dressed in guard uniforms with black cloaks for formal occasions staggered forward. They approached with their hands on the hilts of their swords, but stopped in surprise upon seeing the uniforms worn by Yuder and his party.

"That uniform... could it be...?"

"Heng, shut up! Who are you?"

The one who yelled at the young guard, whose surprised expression couldn't be hidden, was an elderly man with a white beard. Observing the shield-shaped badge on his chest and his more luxurious attire compared to those around him, Yuder stepped forward and introduced himself.

"We come from the capital under the orders of His Excellency, Duke Peletta. I'm Yuder Aile, affiliated with the Cavalry. Might you be the captain of the Hartan guard?"

Upon hearing about the capital and Duke Peletta, the faces of the guards stiffened in unison.

"Indeed, I am Eclen Bukan, the captain of the guards. If you come on the Duke's orders, have you come to meet our Lord?"

Despite hearing that they were sent by the duke, the guard captain questioned them sharply, his demeanor not softening at all.

"Yes. But we were told at the entrance that, unfortunately, your Lord has passed away. We offer our condolences."

Though Yuder's voice was cool and emotionless, the courtesy he displayed was impeccable. After serving as the Cavalry commander for so long, this level of etiquette had become as natural to him as breathing.

"Spare the pointless talk. What's your business here?"

"We were told that Zakail is currently in charge. We would like to meet him."

"He's currently busy. If you wait in the castle, I'll inform Zakail and ask him to come see you."

"Understood."

"Heng! Escort them to the castle. The steward will guide them once they're there."

Seeming to find the mere act of conversation displeasing, the captain of the guards turned away abruptly, raising his voice towards a young guard. The guard, with a reluctant expression, mumbled a few words in an unintelligible dialect and made a vague hand gesture towards Yuder.

"Follow me."

Their ill-treatment continued even after they arrived at the castle. The elderly steward, after hearing the situation from the young guard, alternated his gaze between the scorched castle gate and Yuder's face, before eventually clicking his tongue as if to signal they should enter. He led them to a worn-out, dark room with no place to sit.

"Please wait here."

"Just a moment. Here, really?"

Gakane, who had quietly followed all this while, finally voiced his disapproval. It felt too unreasonable to be asked to wait indefinitely in a room that looked more like a storage, especially at this late hour.

"It's the only place that's not damaged and still decent. I'm really sorry we couldn't provide a better place for visitors who came from far away."

"..."

Leaving behind an apology that didn't seem sincere at all, the steward quickly shut the door and disappeared, leaving behind only a small lantern.

"What is this all about? Such blatant disregard. No one even mentioned Devran first, despite seeing us."

"The guard who escorted us was openly abusive."

"Abusive? When?"

"You wouldn't have noticed because it's an Eastern dialect."

As Jimmy replied with a defeated look, Gakane let out a short, bitter laugh.

"So, is all this related to Devran's disappearance... Yuder, are we really going to wait here quietly?"

"For now."

Yuder quietly responded while examining the room. The damp, dark room was filled with the stench of rotting old boxes and not even a single surviving lamp. There was a small window which barely allowed air in, but that was all.

"Well... Standing around will only tire us. Let's sit and wait."

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Gakane had summoned his shadow clone to sift through the stacked boxes, spreading the cleaner ones on the ground. Once he had arranged some of the boxes to serve as makeshift chairs and a bed, everyone sat down. Then, Nahan started a conversation with Gakane.

"You have a unique ability. Can your shadow pass through walls?"

"Why do you want to know?"

Though Gakane had always seemed friendly, his reluctance to let down his guard in front of Nahan suggested he was selective in displaying his social skills.

After that, an uncomfortable silence lingered, filled only with the anticipation of waiting. Perhaps growing weary of waiting in the late hour, Jimmy began to doze off, leaning against the wall.

By the time the flickering candle inside the lantern had melted down by half, murmuring voices echoed from outside the window. It seemed the villagers who had gone to the back mountain had returned.

"Ah, um... it seems everyone is back...? They'll call us soon, right?"

Jimmy, who had been shaking his head as he fought sleep, perked up his ears and opened his eyes at the sound. Yuder, watching the young boy struggle valiantly against his sleepiness and anxiety, gently tapped his round head.

"If you're sleepy, just lay down and sleep."

"No, I'm not sleepy. I didn't sleep!"

Startled by Yuder's touch, Jimmy made his excuse, his face becoming a vivid red even in the dim light. Of course, no one believed him.

Given the excessive hospitality they had received, the likelihood of the deceased Lord's son calling them right away was fifty-fifty. If nothing was amiss, they would be summoned promptly, but if not, who knew what might happen.

'We'll find out soon enough.'

The murmuring voices echoed from the castle entrance for quite a while, and the inside was also rather noisy. However, no sound of someone coming to call them was heard. Even as darkness gave way to the approaching dawn, the situation remained the same.

Eventually, when the sun had fully risen, Yuder rose from his spot and turned the ring handle on the door.

Creak. Creak-creak. No matter how many times he turned and pushed, the door refused to open outward.

"It's now clear."

Yuder's voice resonated low in the stuffy room.

"It seems they have no intention of meeting us."

"This is truly ridiculous."

Gakane sneered, his eyes showing signs of fatigue.

"So, what's the plan now?"

If asked, Gakane could immediately summon his shadow clone to break down the door. Jimmy was also a boy who, despite his rusty practice sword, could slice through walls like the legendary sword masters in the tales.

"Just say the word. It'll be quick to break down and get out."

But contrary to Gakane's thoughts, Yuder did not immediately try to break down the door. Lost in thought for a moment, he moved to the window and began to whistle in a peculiar pattern.

After repeating the distinctive whistle three times, something flew from afar into the small window. Perched on Yuder's outstretched finger like a torch was undoubtedly the messenger bird he had kept at his saddle side until yesterday.

"...A messenger bird?"

"Let's send a report first, then move."

His soft voice drew attention. Gakane watched as Yuder drew a small piece of paper from his pocket. Just as he wondered how Yuder planned to write without a pen, Yuder lifted a finger and brought it close to the paper.

Moments later, a minuscule flame flowed forth, outlining delicate shapes akin to script, gently searing the surface of the paper. While he had turned his body to prevent others from seeing what he was writing, everyone could recognize the incredible precision involved in his ability, an application so intricate it was scarcely believable even to those watching.

Many besides Yuder could wield the power of flame, but none were capable of utilizing it in such a way, with such control. This level of fine-tuning was even more challenging than summoning a flame large enough to blanket an entire mountain.

Watching the astonishment, not entirely concealed, in the eyes of the bandit leader who had introduced himself as Nahan, Gakane felt a covert sense of superiority.

After awakening their abilities, these individuals had lived out their lives in arrogance. However, once they joined the Cavalry, they experienced a profound sense of defeat in the face of Yuder's overwhelming skill.

Even though Kishiar, the Commander, was the one who had created the Cavalry, it was largely thanks to Yuder that they had learned humility and unified through effort. Regardless of how exceptional the bandit leader's abilities were, Gakane was sure he would be no exception. Feeling this, his nerves, which had been on edge ever since his arrival, began to regain a sense of calm.

Yuder, who had seemingly premeditated his words, swiftly crafted the letter. He then rolled up the paper and placed it in a small pouch attached to the leg of the messenger bird. As he approached the window and reached out his hand, the bird gave a low cry, unfurled its wings, and flew away.

"We're done here. Now... let's go."

Yuder, having turned his body around, fixed his intense gaze on the closed door. His eyes bore a coldness that made one feel as if they were experiencing winter.

"Sir, Sir Zakail! Sir Zakail!"

A few days ago, the youngest son of Lord Hartan, Zakail Hartan, who had unexpectedly passed away, had been incredibly tired from attending the funeral till late into the night.

However, the hand shaking him awake, despite having been commanded not to disturb him, was insistently rough, as if it couldn't care less about his state.

"Sir Zakail! Please wake up. Master Zakail!"

"What is it?"

"They... they're here."

"..."

The tremor in the voice, laden with loathing and fear, was unnaturally intense. Zakail felt sleep abandon him instantly, his heavy eyelids snapping open as he reluctantly sat up.

"Who are you talking about?"

"Well, last night, some uninvited guests showed up, and the steward locked them in the storage house. Those bastards just broke the door down a moment ago and are causing a ruckus demanding to see you...!"

Zakail harshly slapped the servant, who was babbling on nervously.

"Ouch."

"Didn't I make it clear yesterday? I am no longer a young master. Soon, I'll be a lord! Make sure to use the correct title!"

The events of last night hadn't just entailed Zakail performing the last rites for his deceased relatives. He had shown those who had been mocking him as an unworthy shell of a noble since birth what he was truly made of and had succeeded in carving his own destiny.

'Of course, my elder brother is still around, but he'll leave soon.'

If his brother hadn't foolishly disclosed his plans of leaving everything behind for a commoner woman, Zakail might not have achieved the victory he was relishing now.

The raucous bunch had all been cleared away, and he had just been considering finally getting some well-deserved rest when the servant woke him up, still using the old honorifics. It didn't sit well with Zakail.

As Zakail stared down at the servant, trembling from the smack on the cheek, and pondered his fate, the door abruptly swung open again.

"Master Zakail."

Simply from the sound of the voice, Zakail knew it was the old attendant's son. He pressed his throbbing head and spoke sharply.

"Leave. I will rest some more. Did I not say not to disturb me while I'm sleeping?"

"It's not that, Master Zakail. The thing is..."

"Out of the way."

A strange voice interjected, pushing aside the attendant's son. Thereafter, several sets of footsteps neatly filed into his room.

"Are you Zakail Hartan?"

"...Who are you?"

He tried not to show fear, but Zakail involuntarily felt a chill. The aura emitted by those who stood before him was excessively cold and sinister. The man with black hair standing at the forefront made his spine tingle just by his gaze.

"I thought you would recognize us immediately by our uniforms, a shame."

Yuder, standing before Zakail, could easily sense all the emotions he was experiencing. Every servant he had encountered on his way here, since breaking through the door, wore the same expression.

It puzzled him why people always acted defensively even to those who approached them with respect. He'd experienced this many times in his past life, and it was no different now.

"We are Cavalry members from the capital under the command of Duke Peletta. We came to see you, Zakail, on behalf of your late father, but there seems to be some misunderstanding..."

As Yuder trailed off and looked around, the servants meeting his gaze quickly retreated, which caused a slight smirk to tug at the corners of his mouth.

"Despite waiting all night, no one came to see us. We couldn't wait any longer in a room without a chair, so we took the liberty of coming here first. Is now a good time?"

"This..."

Zakail's furious gaze was pinned on the servants peering in from outside the door. However, he quickly calmed himself, biting his lip and standing up. The young and ambitious nobleman didn't forget that the first thing he needed to maintain in this situation was his dignity.

"So...that's how it is. Everyone was in a state of chaos due to the fire incident a few days ago, causing the death of my father and brother. I too fell asleep from exhaustion as soon as I returned at dawn... I apologize for being discourteous to our guests. I hope you will understand. Could you please wait in the drawing-room for a while? I will get ready and join you shortly."

Zakail was still in his sleepwear, having just woken up and not even washed his face. It was embarrassing to be seen by others in this state. He clenched his teeth and tolerated his shame. The man with black hair, who looked at him indifferently, gave a small nod a moment later.

Turning

Chapter 75

"Understood. But I fear I can't wait for long. I am simply famished."

"Attendant! Guide our guests to the reception room and arrange some food for them. Quick!"

Zakail barked nervously. Barely poking his head out from the door, the elderly attendant scrambled to respond, "Yes, sir!" Zakail watched the rabble depart, then swiftly washed his face and changed his clothes.

He thought the world would be his once the funeral was over, but what on earth was happening on the very first day? An icy premonition slithered down Zakail's spine. He shivered and lowered his head.

'No. If I think I'm unlucky, that's exactly what will happen. I must stay positive.'

Hadn't they said they were the Cavalry members sent by the Duke of Peletta? Then, their purpose of visit was clear. Hadn't they also mentioned that such people would be coming soon?

Everything was already in place. It was just that their arrival was slightly, very slightly, earlier than expected.

Taking a deep breath, Zakail stepped into the reception room. While he had been preparing himself, the uninvited guests were comfortably seated in the high-quality chairs that hadn't been burned, nonchalantly clearing the dishes.

"Yuder, you should try this. It's my first time eating it, but it's pretty good."

"That's right. It's a special dish from the east called Koakat. They say it's delicious when added to stew."

The speed at which they were eating was astonishing. No matter how hastily the cook served the dishes, they disappeared in the blink of an eye. The sight was dizzying. Zakail managed to cough loudly, drawing the attention of the unwelcome guests.

"It appears... the food suits your taste. That's a relief."

"Yes, thanks to you."

Yuder, who had been waiting for Zakail, replied leisurely. His demeanor was as if he were the host, which caused Zakail's eyes to twitch involuntarily.

"Now that you have had your fill... we should discuss the matters at hand."

"Ah, I wanted to, but there's a new dish out. Let's finish this first."

Yuder gestured towards the cook, who had brought out a new dish at the perfect moment.

The cook, who was unsure of what to do in the presence of Zakail, carefully set the new dish on the table. Immediately, Jimmy and Gakane lunged at it with their forks. Nahan also coolly managed to snatch a large piece of meat from the dish and quickly devoured it.

Seeing them disregard etiquette and eagerly devour the food as he had requested, Yuder felt a great sense of satisfaction.

The more pride these people had in their noble status, the more they struggled with this behavior. They weren't accustomed to holding back their disdain when faced with something displeasing.

"This is delicious. It's superbly grilled with sauce. I think I might fall in love with eastern cuisine. Yuder, are you sure you don't want any more?"

Gakane, whose mannerisms would never have suggested his noble birth, chewed his grilled vegetables with relish and presented a piece of the meat dish to Yuder with his fork.

"Here, ah."

"Oh, dear..."

The servants' faces changed at the incredibly embarrassing act that not even commoners would perform in front of others. Their roles had clearly been reversed.

'Gakane. He's rather good at this.'

He knew his nobles well, and it showed in this instance too. Yuder internally admired Gakane's newfound talent and resolved to match his pace.

Gakane flashed a happy smile as he accepted the meat that was offered to him. The strikingly handsome man, radiant as a rose, warmed the surrounding air with his genuine smile.

"Is it good?"

"Mmm."

"Yuder! Try mine too! You must taste this!"

Yuder accepted a bite of the dish that Jimmy offered. He was actually quite full, but he couldn't refuse if it meant causing more discomfort to the humans before him.

The newly prepared dishes presented by the chef were quickly devoured.

"Now... may we clear the table and discuss?"

Zakail, who had been sitting at a distance as if reluctant to join, finally spoke with a sour face. Yuder, seeing the distaste evident on Zakail's face as he struggled to speak, nodded.

"Of course."

While the table was being cleared, Yuder briefly explained his name and his reasons for being there to Zakail. Upon hearing that Yuder had come in search of Devran Hartude, Zakail bit his lip and nodded.

"Devran Hartude... yes. Someone by that name came by not long ago. I remember him."

"That will expedite matters. Where is Devran now?"

"He's dead."

"Excuse me?"

The one who questioned was not Yuder. Gakane, wearing a fierce expression, glared at Zakail.

"What are you talking about? Devran is dead?"

"Precisely. Do you know that he was trying to burn down our peaceful Hartan?"

"I heard about it on my way here. But Devran isn't like that. Why would he want to burn down his precious hometown, where his family lives?"

"I don't know either. I was running errands for my father in another village at the time. So all I know is what I heard after I returned to the village after the fire."

After saying this, Zakail cast his eyes downward. He appeared to be carefully choosing his words.

"He killed his family himself, ran to this castle, and caused a big fire. My sick father couldn't escape in time, and my sister and brother-in-law who tried to save him also suffered. My older brother is a knight and couldn't come immediately, but after the funeral yesterday, he had to leave urgently. He said he'll be back in a few days."

He stopped speaking and displayed a mournful face. To anyone watching, he was a noble young man distraught from losing his family.

"As the youngest son who never properly learned about the family affairs, what can I do alone? The best I could do was gather the townspeople and finish the funeral. I planned to discuss the matter with my

brother when he returns and send a report to the capital... I never imagined you would come looking for us this soon."

"I understand the situation. But you haven't explained why Devran is dead."

At Yuder's calm response, Zakail furrowed his brows.

"You still haven't guessed? He took his own life yesterday. It seems he gave up after being sentenced to death and died right away in jail. Although he was a condemned prisoner, since he was under Duke Peletta's command, we were planning to report first and then carry out the execution..... This turn of events has given me a headache."

There were no loopholes in Zakail's explanation. Everything seemed to make sense.

'Except, of course, for the gaping hole of why Devran would kill his family and start a fire....'

Yuder's gaze bored into Zakail's weary face, as if trying to read the hidden intentions behind his words.

"Understood. So, after your elder brother returns and takes his place as the lord, reports and follow-up procedures will officially start, is that right?"

"No, not exactly."

At Yuder's question, Zakail shook his head.

"It's true we plan to discuss and proceed with the reporting and follow-up after my brother's return, but as for the lordship... I will likely be the one to take that position."

Zakail paused for a moment after saying that.

"My brother already has a place in the Silver Cross Knights. Despite his young age, he has outstanding skills and has already ascended to the position of deputy commander. It's said that in a few years, he'll become the commander and receive the title of viscount. Given this position, becoming the lord of such a small territory would rather be a shackle to him."

"Your brother seems remarkable."

"Indeed. Since he was young, his dream has been to leave this small, boring place and become an outstanding knight. So, the one left behind will be me, someone very... different from him."

For the first time, Zakail relaxed his furrowed brow and smiled. Yuder read jealousy and admiration in his eyes.

'Jealousy....'

Zakail Hartan, the youngest son of the former lord. According to eastern customs, he was in a position of a youngest child who had nothing to inherit but the nobility status. However, due to the fire incident a few days ago, he had suddenly come into the position of the lord.

The only person who had benefited from the entire series of incidents was Zakail Hartan.

Was this all a coincidence?

'No.'

Yuder was confident based on his experiences. It couldn't be. The man before his eyes was hiding something, and undoubtedly, within that, there was the clue to Devran's whereabouts.

'But he won't easily spill the beans. I need to observe and wait a bit longer.'

After organizing his thoughts, Yuder slightly bowed his head towards Zakail.

"I understand your situation. However, as we're here on the order of Duke Peletta, it's difficult for us to return immediately. We'd like to continue our investigation and report back to the Duke. Would that be acceptable?"

Yuder intentionally used the title of 'Duke' rather than 'Captain'. Whether it had the desired effect or not, a troubled expression briefly crossed Zakail's face.

Regardless of how low the emperor and his brother, Duke Peletta's, prestige was in the east, their noble status was recognized by everyone. A minor noble like Zakail would inevitably feel small in front of a noble of higher rank. It was one of the lessons about the psychology of nobles that Yuder had learned in his previous life.

"...Do as you wish. I'll instruct the townspeople to cooperate."

"I appreciate your understanding. Then we'll stay here for a while."

Turning

Chapter 76

Having obtained the answer he wanted, Yuder escorted the three who had eaten their fill to a proper guest room, a stark contrast from their previous accommodations.

"They claimed that everything else was completely burnt down, and only that storage-like room was left. But that was a total lie."

"I know, right? There's not even a hint of smoke and everything seems to be in perfect condition!"

Listening to the outraged voices of Gakane and Jimmy, Yuder turned towards the window. From his vantage point, he had an overview of most of the Hartan territory.

The small fiefdom, which should have been charming and peaceful, bore stark, black scars under the sunlight, revealing the cruelty it had suffered.

'Weren't they saying there were hardly any casualties?'

Nahan had indeed said so, but seeing the village filled with the remnants of a fire caused him to doubt this information.

'Of course, of the people I've met here, the most suspicious one is Zakail Hartan.'

Yuder turned his back to the window and recalled the conversation he'd just had with Zakail Hartan. Even though Zakail had reluctantly agreed upon hearing Kishiar's name, he hadn't hesitated much in accepting Yuder's request.

If there had been anything to worry about, it would have been that an outsider from the capital was so willing to pry into the affairs of the village. Zakail didn't respond as easily to that. Considering Zakail's demeanour, he seemed too proud and not very good at hiding his emotions, which only increased Yuder's suspicions.

Hadn't he purposely disrupted Zakail's composure to take a peek at his intentions, asking his companions to show their lack of manners during the meal?

Despite all this, if Zakail still behaved as such, there could only be one plausible answer: Zakail was confident that no matter what Yuder and his Cavalry did, they would not discover his secret.

However, not everything in the world goes as planned. Yuder, recalling the messenger pigeon that would have reached the capital by now, formulated his next plan.

"Haha. This is the first time I've heard such nagging since the Emperor's passing. Seems like I must not have gained much trust."

"...Who are you referring to?"

"Who do you think?"

Kishiar waved the letter in his hand with a slow, elegant smile. His adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman, squinted at the letter with a frown.

"My assistant."

The moment Kishiar woke up from his morning nap, he had been greeted by the messenger pigeon.

The little bird that flew from Hartan was honoured to drink water directly from the Duke after delivering the letter. The pigeon, currently perched on a small statue on the desk and preening its feathers, looked extremely comfortable and content.

"What has he written to make you say such things?"

"Curious, are you?"

"Why not take a look for yourself? Especially you, Nathan, I'll let you see." Handing the letter to his adjutant with a light voice, Kishiar watched as Nathan scrutinized the brown characters that filled the small sheet of paper, furrowing his brows slightly.

"The ink color is unusual."

"It's not ink."

"Excuse me?"

"Take a closer look. It's not written, it's been lightly burned onto the paper. Quite a skill, don't you think?"

Indeed, it was as Kishiar had said. Nathan rubbed the characters with his finger, noticing they didn't smudge at all, and realized his lord was correct. The technique was incredible and almost unbelievable.

"His rate of improvement is beyond monstrous."

Nathan Zuckerman had reached the pinnacle of Sword Mastery at a very young age. It was a lofty position only those who boasted they could accomplish anything with a sword could reach.

However, even he found it difficult to accurately write a letter on a piece of palm-sized paper with the tip of his sword. The challenge was not just about strength but the ability to delicately divide and control that power.

And Yuder Aile accomplished such a feat with ease. His control was terrifying enough to send shivers down the spine of anyone who knew he was an ally.

Dodging the gaze of his lord who seemed to have no sense of caution and was just smiling, Nathan cast his eyes once more on the letter. Although the script was small, it wasn't unreadable.

A moment later, Nathan, who had been rapidly scanning the letter, looked up with a puzzled expression.

"Lord Hartan and the heir are already dead, and the member we need to save is imprisoned, facing execution for setting fire to a village... and on their way there, they've encountered a bandit group composed of Awakeners... shouldn't you send more people?"

"He said he doesn't need them."

Kishiar's answer was clear-cut.

"Despite all these troubles, he is confident that he can resolve everything within three days, so he doesn't need extra people. I can't do anything if he tells me to focus on investigating the Red Stone here and not to forget about it."

"...He didn't write it that rudely, though."

If one took out all the courtesies that could be found in a book teaching the basics of letter writing and summarized, that was roughly the message in the latter half of the letter.

"Even if the missing member is still alive, how can they possibly rescue a prisoner facing execution? Shouldn't I go there myself at this point?"

"If he felt the situation was urgent, he wouldn't have said that. He would have asked to smash everything first and then requested us to clean up afterward. Or he would have retreated and contacted us from somewhere else."

Kishiar replied leisurely, as if he could read the writer's thoughts.

"But judging by the fact that he chose to accompany the bandit leader he met there and even sent the name, it's clear that Yuder Aile thinks this person is extraordinary. I think it's a pseudonym though... what do you think?"

"If it's a pseudonym, it's possible he's from the same country as me."

There was a strange certainty in Nathan's words.

"Yes. The name, after all, means 'revenge' in the language of the Southern Kingdom. It seems like there's an intention there."

The empire knew little about the Southern Kingdom, which was separated from it by a desert. However, Nathan, who was from the South, and Kishiar, who had been with him for a long time, knew more about the language and culture of the South than others did.

The Southern Kingdom had a language and culture system completely different from the surrounding countries, including the empire. As a result, their naming conventions were also significantly different.

A brief smile of interest flickered across Kishiar's beautiful face before disappearing.

"In any case, investigate the bandit group. And find out more about Zakail Hartan, the youngest son of Lord Hartan, who has currently assumed full authority. And..."

As Kishiar casually piled on additional tasks, his red eyes lost their smile and became calm for the first time.

"If there's no further contact after three days, Nathan, you take the seal and proceed as planned."

"Yes, sir."

"Even though one can quickly clear the garbage piled in front of them, no one knows what kind of mess might unfold beneath it."

As Nathan lowered his head, Kishiar's expression once again transformed into its usual ease.

"What about the mages? Didn't they say they needed help?"

"So far, no. They spent the entire day writing and observing from a distance."

Kishiar had personally moved the Red Stone into the building's basement yesterday to facilitate the mages' investigations.

It was a huge, open space, making it easy to maintain a distance from the Red Stone's power, and also convenient to store necessary items. As no one knew there was space beneath the lodging building, there could be no better place for investigation.

Having listened to Nathan's report, Kishiar nodded, leaning deeply back into his chair.

"Good. Caution is a virtue. And the members?"

"As usual, they're dedicated to their training. There's nothing in particular for you to worry about."

"I see. Keep observing."

Kishiar, having ended the conversation, smoothly extended his hand.

"Give back that report."

Having most likely memorized it upon reading, he must have something more to examine. Kishiar began to look over the retrieved paper again. To avoid disturbing his lord, Nathan silently retreated.

The blunt but loyal adjutant's gaze shifted over a scripture being meticulously organized, then out to the sky through the window.

"Oh, well, I really don't know."

"The fire was such a huge event, I can hardly remember what happened that day."

"I don't know. I was... I was too preoccupied with protecting my family."

After obtaining Zakail's permission, Yuder ventured outside the castle to explore the surroundings. All the townspeople he encountered were on their guard, nervously retreating at his approach. Whenever he managed to corner someone and ask about the day of the fire, their answers were all the same: they couldn't remember or they didn't know.

"It's like we've become a plague to them, avoiding us at all costs. People are so suspicious."

Gakane muttered a self-deprecating comment as he looked around the deserted surroundings. The townspeople's suspicion was so profound that even his handsome face and amiable manner failed to break through.

People turned and ran as if they had seen a monster, creating a line of people fleeing from him. It must have been an experience that Gakane Bolunwald had encountered only a few times in his life.

"It wasn't always like this, was it?"

Yuder quietly asked Nahan, who was following them. Nahan offered a faint smile and a nonchalant shrug.

"Of course not to this extent. It seems the lord must have issued some directive."

"What should we do? If people keep refusing to answer and avoiding us..."

Yuder turned his gaze to Jimmy, who looked worried as he surveyed the surroundings. Perhaps because he hadn't slept well and had been exposed to the morning chill while wandering around, the boy's cheeks seemed a bit more flushed than usual.

Noticing that, Yuder lightly touched Jimmy's forehead with the back of his hand.

"Uh, Yuder? Why are you doing that?"

"You seem to have a bit of a fever."

"Fever?"

Turning

Chapter 77

To call it a misconception would have been incorrect; there was indeed a slight feverish warmth to Jimmy. Perhaps recalling what Yuder had mentioned before they arrived here, Gakane quickly approached and clutched both of Jimmy's cheeks.

"Ugh, what's going on?"

After a moment, he subtly nodded his head towards Yuder, casting a secretive glance. It meant that there were no signs of him manifesting his secondary gender yet.

"...It does seem like you have a fever, just like Yuder said. Jimmy, you should have told us if you weren't feeling well."

"I didn't because I feel fine! I'm really okay. This is nothing. You're not planning on sending me back first, are you?"

Jimmy shook his head vigorously and sent pleading looks at Yuder, but Yuder didn't flinch.

Even if it was just a mild fever due to fatigue and overwork, it shouldn't be taken lightly. After all, wasn't it Yuder who was in charge of their party?

"Gakane. Take Jimmy and return to the castle."

"Me? Then what about you..."

Yuder decided to send Gakane along, seeing as the boy wouldn't go back if left alone. Gakane's gaze quickly shifted between Yuder and Nahan behind him.

"Do you think it'll be okay with just the two of you?"

"If anything happens, I'm not the one who should be worried, they should be."

"That may be true, but..."

Gakane let out a sigh, and after a moment, he opened his mouth while glaring at Nahan.

"Anyway, if you need me, send a signal of fire towards the castle. Even though my body will be there, I can send my shadow clone a considerable distance."

"Understood."

Yuder remembered seeing the entirety of the territory from the guest room window they were to stay in and nodded lightly. Even though it seemed unlikely that Gakane would need to send his shadow clone, showing precaution wasn't a bad thing.

"You two are about to share a bed, and yet you're acting so stiff."

"Sleeping? Who? With you?"

At Nahan's words, Gakane questioned back in astonishment.

"There are only two rooms available, so someone will have to share with me, right?"

"..."

Gakane's eyelashes trembled a little, as if he hadn't considered that.

"In that case... I would rather..."

"Let's discuss this later, we need to move first."

Yuder raised his hand to stop the pointless conversation from continuing.

"That kind of talk? This is important too, Yuder!"

"Jimmy's health is more important than that."

"I am really fine, brother. Please believe me!"

Jimmy, who had been standing with a gloomy face, jumped into the conversation without missing a beat.

"Jimmy."

After taking a brief look at Nahan, Yuder leaned down towards Jimmy and whispered near his ear.

"I've heard that you've had a slight fever for some time now. Your condition may have worsened due to fatigue, so rest today."

"Who, who said that?"

"The Commander."

As soon as Kishiar's name was mentioned, Jimmy's stubbornness immediately faltered. It seemed that he too felt something was off.

"I understand..... I'll go."

"Rest well today, and if you seem perfectly fine tomorrow, I'll continue to give you tasks even if you refuse."

"...Really?"

At Yuder's words, Jimmy's head shot up. Yuder looked at the boy's face, which had begun to light up again, and firmly nodded.

"It would be a loss for me not to utilize the labor I've brought with me."

"Hehe. Fine! Then I'm going straight to sleep. I'm really drowsy, you know."

Looking at the now-brightened Jimmy, Yuder gestured to Gakane to come closer.

"Even if you don't feel any signs yet, if you think it might manifest, lay Jimmy down on the bed and move directly to the next room. Then, call me through your shadow clone."

"Got it. Anything else?"

"When you isolate him, lock the door to Jimmy's room. And...."

Yuder glanced at Hartan Castle in the distance. Zakail Hartan should have been watching what they were doing by then.

"Keep an eye on Zakail Hartan's movements within the castle. If he moves anywhere, call me then as well."

"So you want me to monitor that guy? Fine. I was suspecting him too."

Gakane seemed to have noticed the suspicious demeanor of Zakail that Yuder had caught onto. After Gakane and Jimmy returned to the castle, Yuder shifted his gaze to Nahan.

"So we're left alone. What's your next plan? Are you going to continue searching for the villagers as before?"

"No."

He had searched for everyone he needed to. But since no one was willing to give information, he was thinking of another approach.

"I'll look for someone who has no choice but to speak."

"A person who has no choice but to speak."

Nahan's eyes shone with interest.

"Who might that be?"

Instead of answering, Yuder silently pointed at a place. Many people were struggling to clean up a blacksmith shop that had been burned down. Among them were a good number of guards who had been dispatched to maintain the village's security.

"Guards? They wouldn't be much help either, would they?"

"They would at least know the exact location of the house or grave of the comrade I was looking for."

In such a small village, a guard was akin to an official handyman, dealing with all sorts of chores.

Given that they moved according to the Lord's orders, it would have been impossible for them not to have heard Zakail Hartan's 'Please cooperate' message like the others.

Yuder approached a young guard who had just arrived near a deserted road, struggling to pull a cart full of the burnt bricks.

Sensing a stranger, the guard's gaze darted toward Yuder before quickly looking away as though he had seen something he wasn't supposed to see. Whether he acted like this or not, Yuder had already decided to target him.

"I'd like to ask you a question."

"Can't you see I'm busy right now? Please move along."

The voice seemed familiar, and indeed it was the same guard who had led them to the castle the previous night.

"We have come with permission from Zakail himself, who said we could ask anyone..."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

The guard, tired from hauling bricks, flared up in irritation.

"I never heard such a thing, and I'm extremely busy right now. Go ask other people. That should work, shouldn't it?"

"Understood. I thought that the guards, of all people, would know since this is the future Lord's order, but if you say so... well... it's nice to see the free atmosphere of the Hartan guards. Very impressive."

The young guard's eyes widened as if feeling the sting in Yuder's words.

"Ah. By the way, it's not a big deal, but may I know your name?"

"...Are you, are you threatening me?"

The young guardsman's eyebrows twitched violently.

"Of course not. I was just curious. Considering we had a connection last night, I thought Zakail might enjoy hearing about you."

"..."

The young guardsman glanced behind him. There was no one in the busy crowd of villagers paying him any attention. Putting down his cart, he opened his mouth with an angry expression.

"Darn it. What are you trying to ask?"

The fish had finally bitten the bait. Yuder showed him behind a large tree with a cold smile. It was a spot big enough to hide about three people.

"It'll only take a moment. Follow me."

They moved behind the tree. Luckily, the large tree, seemingly centuries old, was untouched by the fire.

"Do you know Devran?"

The moment they were all under the shade of the tree, Yuder quickly asked in a low voice. The young guardsman frowned as if he had expected that question.

"...I know him. But I don't know much about what happened that day."

"That's okay. What kind of person was Devran?"

"What kind of person was he?"

"Since you grew up in the same village, I thought you might know him better than we do."

"Just a... regular... guy."

The guardsman looked uncomfortably at the ground.

"You seem about the same age, I guess you played together when you were kids."

Recalling the age of Devran Hartude, which he had heard before coming here, Yuder asked. For the first time, the young guardsman's eyes briefly fluttered. He seemed about to respond, but ended up shutting his mouth.

"..."

"What was Devran's family composition?"

Instead of pressing him for an answer, Yuder moved on to the next question.

"Only his father and a younger sister."

"Good. Can you tell me where Devran's house is?"

"That's...."

The young guardsman lifted his head. Yuder followed his gaze, turning around. Behind a few burnt and ragged houses, there was one ruin, particularly charred and untouched. It was the size of a small house.

"That's it. Just to let you know in advance, there's nothing left because it all burned."

"...I see."

His words seemed to be discouraging, but of course, Yuder had no intention of heeding them. He took note of where the ruin was and then opened his mouth again.

"Were the deceased family members of Devran in there at the time?"

"They said so, so it must be true!"

"So, they wouldn't have created separate graves."

The guardsman fell silent for the second time. He gritted his teeth anxiously and finally forced his mouth open.

"Hey, how long are you going to question me? I told you I'm busy."

"Don't worry, this is the last question."

Yuder looked straight ahead.

"Can you tell me how the bodies of convicts are dealt with in Hartan?"

Turning

Chapter 78

"Why...?"

"Surely you don't expect a guard to be unaware of that."

There was a hint of hesitation and a great deal of doubt in the eyes of the young guard who had met his gaze squarely. However, Yuder did not clarify the intent of his question.

"Incredible. He is the kind of person who couldn't help but tell everything."

After the young guard had given all the answers and hastily left, Nahan, who had been watching him from a step behind all this time, approached Yuder.

"Did you recognize that man as the guard we met last night and targeted him?"

"No."

However, as a result, the intimidation had been even more effective, which was fortunate. Following Yuder, who walked decisively towards the house where Devran had lived, Nahan continued the conversation.

"I never imagined he would take the threat of revealing his name to Zakail so seriously. Why, though? Even if you told Zakail, he would likely not care, as long as things were going as he wished."

"Just because the one at the top doesn't care doesn't mean those below feel the same way."

As an example, he referred to the remarkably stern and intimidating old guard captain.

"...I see."

Nahan's eyes shone oddly, quickly grasping the meaning behind the words.

"So lower-ranking individuals dislike even being mentioned, for fear it could offend those above them. Hmm. How did you know such a subtle detail? Were you perhaps a member of the imperial army?"

"Do I have to answer that as well?"

Yuder quietly retorted, implying that the one losing out wasn't him but Nahan. At this, Nahan gave a low chuckle.

"I'm a bit too curious, you see. Especially when I meet a competent brother like you."

"I would've thought I told you there were no brothers like you."

"Your coldness is almost at the level of a glacier's breath. Surely, you could share that much."

"If you want to know, you should start sharing."

Seemingly annoyed by Nahan's excessive curiosity and reluctance to share his own information first, Nahan quickly shut his mouth. Silence followed until they reached Devran's house.

'Here we are.'

Everything was charred black. The ruins were devastating even from afar, but the horror was more palpable up close. Yuder slowly circled around the ruins, filled with the burnt debris, and inspected it.

The neighboring houses and streets they had seen on the way here were all marked by the same charred traces, but none were as severe as Devran's house. At least the others hadn't collapsed like this.

As Yuder returned to his original position and looked down at the chaotic debris, Nahan stood next to him. Yuder glanced at him and then opened his mouth.

"You must have come this far as well, right?"

"I did."

Nahan casually agreed.

"However, I didn't discover anything beyond the conjecture that the fire here was more purposefully destructive than elsewhere."

This was in line with what Yuder had thought. He was certain that the fire which had consumed Devran's house had been deliberately set.

While the other parts of the village had been only superficially scorched, the fire that had burnt this house down seemed intent on completely annihilating everything. If not, the house wouldn't have been destroyed to such an extent that its very form was unrecognizable.

"The villagers seem to consider it ominous to even approach this place. The bodies inside must've burnt up, so it seems they plan to bury it as is."

"Well...."

Yuder stared towards the ruinous debris piled high, muttering about the secrets it could potentially hide within.

"Even if the outside has been burned, could the inside be the same?"

"Hmm? Do you mean there might still be a body inside? But it would be difficult to clear these ruins on our own."

Yuder gave a nonchalant wave of his hand, without turning to look at the puzzled Nahan. Then, a tremendous wind rose silently around the ruins of Devran's house, starting to lift the debris as one. The ground trembled minutely as if experiencing a mild earthquake, submitting to the immense power before it.

A moment later, they could clearly see the bare floor of Devran's house, revealed beneath the rubble floating mid-air.

"The inside... surprisingly, it's rather intact."

Nahan glanced back and forth between the debris and the floor, murmuring quietly.

"We might be able to find traces of a body inside."

They looked at each other, then stepped fearlessly into the interior. The old stone floor, hardly burned by the fire, was clean.

However, if two people had indeed died here, there were no signs of their bodies. No bones, no blood, nothing else was visible.

"Most of the debris seems to be furniture, dishes, and cloth from the house. Other than that... is this a shovel?"

As Nahan wandered among the floating debris, he nudged a small shovel with a burnt handle. Yuder approached what seemed to be the area where a door and a wall once stood, stepping over the charred debris.

From the original shape of the floating debris above, it appeared that a bed might have been here.

Then, Yuder noticed something small gleaming amidst the charred wood and cloth. What he grasped in his outstretched hand was a small, round piece of metal.

Although it was difficult to recognize its original form due to the fire, it was certainly a piece of jewelry adorned with a gem.

"What's that? A brooch?"

"It seems so."

Yuder examined the object, rolling it in his fingers. It appeared to be an ordinary brooch, but when he put pressure on the end, the inside jingled and twisted ever so slightly. A spark of interest appeared in Yuder's eyes at this realization.

'A double brooch?'

Even an ordinary brooch would be a luxury for a commoner, but this one was a double brooch, designed with a hidden compartment.

Yuder remembered seeing such double brooches in his previous life, often used by nobles to store miniature portraits of loved ones. They were always popular for their romantic appeal, though he himself could never quite understand it.

He tried to open the brooch by applying pressure with his fingers, but due to the distortion from the fire, it didn't open easily. After several attempts, Yuder finally managed to pry it open. Inside, a small portrait revealed itself, fortunately undamaged by the fire.

'This is.....!'

Upon seeing the image, Yuder unintentionally furrowed his brow, Nahan peering into the brooch alongside him had a similar reaction.

"A knight donned in a cloak with the insignia of the Hartan family and a cross emblem. There's only one person who fits that description."

"..."

Zakail Hartan had said that he had a brother who was a member of the Silver Cross Knight Order.

And Devran Hartude had a father and a younger sister.

Yuder remembered Devran expressing concern to his fellow members that the lord might not grant his request to move their residence due to his sister.

Devran and his family had disappeared, but Zakail Hartan's brother had not died. The visage of the man in the fine brooch discovered in the ruins of Devran's house. What did all this signify?

Yuder closed the brooch and tucked it into his chest pocket.

"Get out. I'm going to restore it to its original state."

"Have we found everything we came to find?"

Quick-witted, Nahan answered and slipped out of the ruins. Yuder followed him out of the burned house, slowly released his power, and returned the remaining debris to their original places.

A large amount of black dust rose with the sound of crumbling, but none of the ashes flew to Yuder, who was enveloped by the wind.

"Where are we heading next? To the back mountain as well?"

"...Yes."

Before they had arrived, they had heard from a young guard that the bodies of executed convicts were buried casually around a large rock in Mount Clayman, extending behind the Hartan territory.

Even if he committed suicide, Devran was a convict, so his body must have been buried there.

Of course, if he truly died.

No bodies of people who were said to have been burned to death in the house were found, so could Devran's body really be fully discovered? He felt like he could bet it wouldn't.

And his thought was confirmed when they reached Mount Clayman after about an hour's walk.

'Just as I thought. Nothing.'

They quickly found the large rock used to bury the bodies of the convicts. As the young guard had said, the rock had a bizarre appearance, looking like a monstrous creature standing on two legs and roaring, making it easy to identify. The guard mentioned that the townspeople called it 'The Rock of Death'.

However, there were no signs around the Rock of Death that suggested something had recently been buried. Just in case, Yuder lightly manipulated the wind and earth to turn the area upside down, but all he found were a few skeletal fragments that seemed to have been buried a very long time ago.

"Over here. Can you come this way?"

Then, Nahan, who had disappeared a short distance away, called Yuder.

"There's a pit here."

The pit that Nahan found was closer to the woods than to the area around the rock. It was narrow and deep enough to bury a person, but there was nothing inside it.

"Was it like this from the beginning?"

"No. When I found it, the fallen leaves were... covering it like this."

Nahan moved his feet to roughly cover the pit with the piles of leaves that had been pushed to the side. It was clear that it had been covered up hastily.

Yuder pushed the leaves aside again and knelt down in front of the revealed pit. When he leaned over to look inside, a foul, damp smell wafted out.

Although the scent was mixed with the strong smell of decaying leaves that had been piled up for a long time, the foul smell was extremely familiar to Yuder.

Yuder reached out and randomly scooped up a handful of dirt from inside the pit. Inside his black gloves, he could see a liquid that had not completely dried out seeping out from between the crumbled soil.

'Blood.'

There was no doubt about it. It was blood.

Turning

Chapter 79

"Someone was buried here, the blood was spilling. It's clear that they're gone. Looking at the circumstances, they didn't escape on their own, but who took them away?"

After finishing his speculation, similar to Yuder's, Nahan quietly turned his head to look deep into the forest. It was hard to make out footprints from the long-accumulated pile of leaves, but once he knew that someone had been here, several traces caught his eye.

A young branch that looked broken as if someone had bumped into it, weeds growing in the crevices of rocks that had been stepped on, and faint brown shoe prints on a white stone. Perhaps the brown was a footprint left by stepping on blood.

'Two... or maybe three.'

Yuder, who guessed the number of people here through these signs, stood up from his place.

"Do you intend to follow?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think it would be better to return and come back with your companions? We don't know what kind of enemy lies ahead."

"It doesn't matter who's there."

Unless it was an Archmage who had trained only in attack magic all his life in the Pearl Tower, or a swordmaster with ample battlefield experience, there were few in this world who could injure Yuder. Considering that Yuder had even more practical experience, he would not easily yield to anyone.

It was more important not to miss the traces they had finally found than fearing an unknown enemy.

"If you're scared, go back alone."

"How could you think that? Who do you think discovered this pit? If I were a coward, I wouldn't have followed you guys in the first place."

'Then why on earth did he ask such an unnecessary question?' Yuder frowned, thinking him as inscrutable as Kishiar.

He started walking, turning his body as if to say follow if you want, and if not, don't. Shortly after, he faintly heard Nahan's footsteps behind him. The traces led them deeper into the mountains, choosing only the paths less travelled by.

"Doesn't something feel strange?"

Nahan spoke again as they approached a valley, and the radius of the forest began to widen. Yuder, carefully searching for traces, responded roughly.

"What."

"As we go deeper, the path is getting wider."

"It might be a place where the path merges with the one used by the people from the nearby village."

"No. It's a bit different from that..."

As Nahan mumbled something, he suddenly grabbed Yuder's arm. At the same time, the air around them wavered, and the color subtly changed.

"What are you doing."

"Someone is coming."

Just as he said, a few unfamiliar faces appeared from the opposite path moments later. At a glance, they looked like ordinary hunters, but there was no sight of tools such as snares or daggers for dismantling traps, which are commonly carried by hunters.

They seemed completely oblivious to Yuder and Nahan, casually chatting as they gradually approached.

"Still not talking, huh? Such a stubborn bastard."

"Yes. Seems like he thinks he's somebody now that he's received a surname from the Emperor. He's too stubborn to speak a word."

"Tsk. There's no cure for an old dog. Despite dying, he's still so full of life. What the hell were the guys who were supposed to control him doing?"

"Apparently... he's one of the capable men that Duke Peletta gathered from all over the Empire. They are trying, but it's hard. Please understand."

"Perhaps it would be better to simply handle them moderately and let them go, rather than using the family as bait," a voice said.

Yuder instinctively realized who they were talking about.

'Devran.'

Indeed, Devran was still alive. He wasn't sure if the one dragged away and buried, bleeding in the pit, was Devran, but it was a relief that the path seemed to be leading the right way.

"Ah, and... there's one more thing I need to report to the Warden."

"What is it?"

"The youngest Hartan has asked for help. He says Duke Peletta has already sent someone, suspecting something."

"Someone?"

The man called the Warden stopped in his tracks. Through the branches, a blurry view of brown hair and a face was visible. For a moment, Yuder froze as he realized that this man was from his previous life's memory.

'That guy is...'

The Apeto Dukedom, one of the four great dukedoms. In Yuder's memory, it was a place quieter than the other dukedoms but equally sinister.

The man who was going to receive the title of Duke of Apeto about five years later had the same face as this Warden, who had been his direct subordinate.

Younger than his memory, but it was definitely him. He had seen his face and greeted him several times at the party he had attended as a Cavalry commander.

'I can't remember his name, but there's no doubt about it.'

People from the Apeto Dukedom were in the east, where the Diarca Dukedom's power was strong. It wasn't impossible for them to be there, but it was strange to run into them on this mountain, especially since the circumstances made it clear they were the ones who took Devran Hartude.

Without knowing exactly what was going on, Yuder tried to quickly recall his memory while not missing the conversation unfolding before him.

"Yes. They sent four people, all of whom are said to be capable."

"It's a bit early, but we did expect them to send such people. If we ignore them, they'll find nothing and return. Tell him to ignore it. Instead, tell them to pay more attention to his brother!"

"I conveyed as much, but it seems he's still worried. He was asking us to send someone in case the Diarca side notices something because of their rampaging."

"We don't have people to spare. Did he not anticipate even this situation when he betrayed Diarca and killed his own father and sister? He's the one who reached out to us, blinded by the desire for a small-town lordship. Tsk! Just ignore that coward."

"Understood."

"We've already found everyone we could find here, and soon we'll be off, so just dealing with them casually is enough."

The Warden clicked his tongue and moved on, his expression filled with dissatisfaction.

'Zakail Hartan betrayed Diarca and joined hands with Apeto, then killed the previous lord and his sister... All for the lordship.'

It was an unexpected story.

'But even if he's after the lordship, what does any of this have to do with Devran?'

As he watched the Warden's party heading uphill, Yuder moved to follow them without realizing it. However, Nahan, who was holding his arm, stopped him.

"Don't get any closer."

"..."

"Although we had covered ourselves with an illusion to appear as trees, there could still be those who were sensitive enough to notice our presence."

A murmuring, as though someone were saying 'like you,' seemed to drift on the edge of hearing.

Just then, one of the men who had silently followed the group, dressed as a hunter, suddenly turned his head and looked toward Yuder and Nahan.

"Over there!"

"What?"

"I heard something from over there!"

It appeared that Nahan's advice had come too late. The men dressed as hunters took up a defensive stance all at once, and the Warden also turned his body, revealing a cold gaze.

"Who's there! Reveal yourself!"

Although they had not yet detected the illusion, it was only a matter of time until they did, now that they knew something was there. Yuder subtly moved his right hand to rest on the hilt of the practice sword loosely hanging at his waist.

"... Count to three and then dispel the illusion."

"Are you planning to handle all of them by yourself?"

"It's not a problem, just keep track of the time."

Yuder etched the number and positions of the people in front of him into his mind and began to count quietly.

"One... two...."

"Ha! Okay, we come out. What now?"

His count to three was cut off. Yuder, hand still resting on the hilt of his sword, turned around. Two people were emerging from behind the rocks near where Yuder and Nahan were standing.

One person was unknown, but the other was very familiar. He was Kiolle Da Diarca, a member of the Diarca family and a knight from the Imperial Knights.

'...Why is he here?'

"You guys are pretty quick on the uptake. What are you doing here?"

"..."

"I am Senior Knight Kiolle Da Diarca of the Imperial Knights. This is one of the places where the Imperial Knights come to train every year, under the auspices of the Diarca family. I have never heard of people like you staying here. Who are you?"

Kiolle's gaze was as arrogant as ever. As he scrutinized the people from the Apeto dukedom, the Warden stepped forward. Yuder could see an intense whirl of emotions stirring ceaselessly within his eyes.

"Ah, so you are the knights of the Imperial Knights. I've heard much about your reputation. Have you come here... hmm. For training?"

"Didn't you hear what I just said? That's right!"

"We're just passing hunters... we'll leave soon. So please don't be too angry."

Given that he didn't know how much Kiolle had heard, the Warden seemed to have decided to play dumb. However, all Kiolle saw in his eyes was a hint of contempt.

"Hunters, huh. Do you think I'd believe that?"

"...It's true. We are....."

"Dogs of Apeto daring to venture this far without fear. You must not fear death. I'll figure out what kind of tricks you've been pulling here and report it to my father."

Turning

Chapter 80

The Warden's expression changed at the mention of dogs of Apeto. The numerous worries that had been lurking over his downcast face seemed to dissipate into the cold air.

"...Did you hear what we said?"

"Yes, I heard!"

"I see. Do you happen to know where the other knights who came here for training are now?"

"Why are you asking about those bastards?"

"Well..."

Touching his ear and stalling, the Warden signaled the others around him with a nod and gave a chilly smile.

"I'm curious how long it would take for them to notice if the idiot youngest of the Diarca family disappeared from here."

"What?"

"Just take care of it and don't worry about it! After all, there's only two of them!"

"Yes!"

Excluding the Warden and his closest subordinate, eight men all stepped forward at once. Yuder soon understood why most of them did not hold weapons.

Out of the three who had drawn their weapons, the others began to showcase threatening auras. Their hands and feet began to grotesquely transform as elemental powers like fire and water began to manifest.

"...So five of the Awakeners have joined."

In the momentary standoff, Nahan, who had grabbed Yuder's shoulder, moved him aside and murmured in a low voice.

"I think I might have an idea where my missing brothers have gone."

"Ki, Kiolle sir! There are too many enemies! Are you really going to confront them like this? It would be better if we first retreated.....!"

From behind Kiolle, a panicked knight panted out. His hand, holding the sword, trembled, suggesting that he was barely experienced in real combat.

"You're talking nonsense, Paviel. Members of the Diarca never retreat in front of vermin like these. Let alone, there are some among them who possess powers that I absolutely can't forgive. And you're telling me to retreat? Obviously, they all have to die!"

"But...!"

"Paviel. If you're thinking of turning your back on me now, even if you survive, Diarca will never forgive you. Are you scared of those vermin, spewing fire and strutting around with the power gifted by the Red Stone?"

At the mention of "vermin spewing fire", Kiolle gnashed his teeth.

'...Hmm. That's probably... because of me.'

Yuder felt an odd sensation as he belatedly realized that the source of Kiolle's intense anger, which had clouded his judgment, might have been due to their past interactions. The young knight appeared to still be in a state of confusion.

"..."

A mixture of terror and resentment flickered across the knight named Paviel's face.

"No..."

"That's right. That's how it should be. I knew you were here to monitor me under my father's orders. He probably promised you a promotion. But, in the end, that promise ends if I object. Understand?"

"Yes..."

"This is the only time your noble background, being from the Han family, will be useful."

Kiolle's icy words echoed as his gaze turned towards the enemy, who was charging at him with arms transformed into swords.

"In the end, they are too scared of the consequences to kill us! They're all talk! Go!"

'Well, they might be able to kill you.' Yuder felt a twinge of regret that he couldn't voice his thoughts as he watched them clash.

Though the group consisted of five Awakeners, and three quite skilled swordsmen, Kiolle and his fellow knight fought admirably.

Watching Kiolle hold his own against the Awakeners, Yuder thought that the experiences he had endured, though they had knocked him unconscious, might not have been entirely useless.

Judging by their previous exchanges, it seemed that the arrogant knight from the Diarca family had been here for training by sheer coincidence. Mentions of other knights suggested that they might be in the vicinity as well. The longer the battle dragged on, the more disadvantageous it would be for Apeto's side.

"Damn it. They just had to show up for training right now... this is getting annoying. Damn Diarca, causing trouble in his entire life."

They've heard the place where the knights in training are staying is far from here. Nobody, not even the Warden, would have thought they'd run into them here. That's why there weren't any orders for them to move from above.

As Kiolle and his subordinates fought, the Warden of the Apeto family and his subordinates, standing not too far away, expressed their anger loudly.

"What on earth did that man do in the capital to come here all of a sudden?"

"From what I know, he's been causing continuous trouble and disorder within the Imperial Knights. It's said that the Duke himself sent him here for training to calm the resentment built up in his heart."

"Resentment, my foot. Does that guy look like someone who'd have something built up in his heart? It's more like he's building resentment in the hearts of others! He's an ignorant youngster who doesn't know how high the sky is, thanks to his well-connected father!"

Yuder agreed with what he heard, empathizing greatly with the angry voice of the Warden.

"We cannot let him live once he hears the name 'Apeto'. Kill him here to prevent any future problems. Push harder! What are you doing against just two opponents!"

At the sharp cry of the Warden, the movements of the fighters paused momentarily, then resumed with even more intensity.

Though their abilities were suitable for combat, they lacked experience. Fighting without disturbing several comrades in a forest filled with obstacles required tact, something they seemed to lack.

'... Did they gather those who just awakened? They are incredibly clumsy.'

Kiolle and his fellow knight remained surprisingly composed against them. However, as the enemies started to charge desperately after the Warden's order, they were quickly overwhelmed.

"U-uh, Sir Kiolle! We should retreat and scatter them!"

"... Retreating now will do no good! What on earth did you learn in the Imperial Knight!"

Even in this critical moment, Kiolle was stubborn. His judgment wasn't bad, but ultimately two people couldn't face eight.

'If they had turned and run from the start, picking off the scattered enemies, they might have had a chance.'

Kiolle's excessive hatred for the Awakeners ended up ruining everything. Yuder watched as wounds gradually accumulated on Kiolle and his fellow knight, contemplating what to do next.

He definitely needed to capture one from the Apeto side for information, but he hesitated on what to do about Kiolle's side.

If he left them to die, there was a high risk that the Diarca Ducal House, who would likely learn about the knight group's presence in the nearby village, would stir up trouble. However, revealing himself to save them could lead to repercussions from Kiolle himself later on.

'I thought he was a man who would die quickly in my previous life because he didn't stand out... But at least back then, he wouldn't have died here.'

In a way, the entire vacation time of the Cavalry caused by Yuder had twisted the situation up to this point.

"Tch!"

"What the hell are you doing, Paviel!"

Then, another great uproar arose around Kiolle, who was in the midst of fighting. Yuder, whose eyes had been lost in thought, looked up and felt a surprising emotion upon seeing the subordinate knight step forward, drop his weapon, and raise both hands.

"It can't be helped. Kiolle, you are a Diarca, I don't want to die here because of your stupidity! I'm surrendering, so spare me!"

The subordinate knight, more severely wounded than Kiolle, was covered in countless wounds on his right arm and both legs. Deciding it was too hard to hold his sword any longer, it appeared he had chosen to betray Kiolle and attempt surrender.

"...You dishonor our knighthood!"

"The one who doesn't know shame is you, Kiolle! Why should I die because of you! Because of you, a bastard, who relies solely on the power of your family!"

"What... did you say?"

Kiolle raised his sword to strike down the knight in a fit of fury. But the Warden's hand was quicker. As soon as he raised his hand, one of the henchmen, dressed like a hunter and holding a sword, blocked Kiolle's attack. The clash of metal against metal echoed as Kiolle dropped his sword.

The surroundings fell silent as the battle calmed down for a moment.

"Ha... This is something. I didn't anticipate this."

The Warden looked at the knight who had surrendered and gave a grim smile.

"So there is a knight like you who knows what's practical in the honorable Imperial Knights. I wouldn't have wanted to die for such a person either. I understand."

"..."

"You said spare me... I can spare you. But I can't show sympathy without any compensation. Why should I spare you when I could kill both of you?"

"Anything... I'll do anything. I'll keep the secrets."

"Paviel, you..."

Kiolle's eyes twitched in disbelief. However, the subordinate knight didn't look back at him, just kept his head bowed.

The Warden seemed greatly amused by this and burst into hearty laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha... This is truly a sight to behold. Noble knights who vowed to serve God and pledge loyalty betraying each other... Especially when one is a thorn in the side like Diarca."

"..."

Yuder saw the Warden move his snake-like thin eyes and give a subtle signal to his subordinates who were lined up around him. He then continued nonchalantly.

"Does anyone know that you knights came here?"

"Eight other knights who came here with us know. But they won't come looking for us."

"Why?"

At the Warden's question, the subordinate knight clenched his lips with an enraged expression.