

Turning 71

Chapter 71

"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 was 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?