

Turning 73

Chapter 73

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."