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Then, the second and third monsters, lured by the Cavalry members, began to approach. Yuder, alternating between his sword and a bit of his power, did his utmost to prevent the monsters' desperate attacks from reaching Kishiar.

Kishiar managed to dispatch up to the fifth monster without even swinging his sword more than a few times, using unilateral and overwhelming power. The speed of his actions was truly astonishing.

Thanks to this, the Cavalry members had the luxury of becoming accustomed to the lure-and-attack formation in actual combat, a tactic they were trying for the first time. Initially a bit hasty and mistimed, they gradually became composed and started to move in unison, like a single large entity.

The imperial army and the candidates, witnessing Kishiar's overwhelming swordsmanship and the divine sword in his hand, regained their confidence and composure, infused with newfound hope. The anxiety to hasten matters faded, allowing them to move the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran inside the building without disrupting the encirclement. It was a remarkable achievement, made possible by meticulously executing each step in a task they were performing for the first time.

No casualties needing urgent evacuation had arisen yet. Although many must have seen the monster falling from the sky, rushing toward the headquarters seemed unlikely at this point.

The fact that monsters had appeared remained unchanged. However, the results differed significantly depending on whether one acted in panic or maintained calm and composure.

To Yuder, it seemed that Kishiar was well aware of this and was using it more effectively than anyone else.

‘His very first words were already a calculated move. Everyone knows that a crack appears briefly when a monster emerges, but he deliberately downplayed the anomaly in the crack, focusing only on the familiar aspects to quickly dispel the chaos.’

Normally, the cracks that tear open during a monster's emergence disappear as soon as the monster fully materializes, usually so swiftly that it's hard to discern the crack.

However, cracks that appear right before a disaster, which do not immediately release monsters, show an abnormal persistence. In the west, monsters had explosively emerged after such cracks disappeared; this time, there was a delay before the monsters emerged, but it was not typical.

Nevertheless, a 'crack' appeared followed by 'monsters'. Kishiar deliberately emphasized this point to prevent people from becoming excessively anxious about the unusual aspects. He helped them accept the current situation as familiar, enabling them to regain their usual strength and response capabilities.

The ability to succinctly end all this turmoil with just a few words was not an easy task, even for a seasoned leader.

‘After calming the people, he deliberately exerted more force to eliminate the monsters conspicuously. Even if this meant excessively expending energy, it was a necessary action deemed for the benefit of those present.’

Kishiar's swordsmanship and abilities were indeed formidable, but he, like Yuder, had already expended a significant amount of power before arriving here. Rather than using such overwhelming and excessive force from the beginning, it would have been a safer decision for him to go a little slower to understand the monster's nature and information.

But Kishiar chose not to proceed as expected. He opted for a more perilous approach for the sake of the members present and others, entrusting Yuder with the task of understanding the monsters and ensuring his own safety.

Yuder understood that even a slight faltering in his support could put Kishiar in immediate danger, yet Kishiar had made this decision regardless.

The reason was clear.

'Because he believed that I would firmly support him. And conversely... Kishiar was confident that he could prevent me from having to directly exert my strength against the monsters.'

Yuder watched Kishiar, who was wholly focused on the battle, brushing away the blinding shards flying towards him.

In this perilous situation, armed with only a sword, Kishiar appeared more liberated than ever. His unbelievable speed and tremendous strength against the much larger monsters made it all possible.

However, Kishiar's apparent freedom did not mean the task was easy. Yuder, even as a mere observer, could feel the intense concentration Kishiar was applying to the task at hand.

Each movement, laden with power, might seem to others as just great strength or a tremendous aura, but the reality was different. Kishiar was not someone who, like ordinary people, could freely attack using all his strength.

If he failed to maintain the balance of the powers within his body, problems could arise, making it imperative to stay within a safe limit. Even Yuder could hardly guess how difficult this was.

'Yet still...'

The sight of the man swinging his aura-wrapped sword, evading the monster's attacks, seemed incongruously liberating. It was as if a beast, long restrained by a leash, had finally been set free to run wild for a moment.

Yuder thought that perhaps this moment marked the first time in Kishiar La Orr's life that he could purely focus on facing his enemy. While such an experience was common for Yuder, it was likely not the case for Kishiar.

His swordsmanship, honed in solitude and intense practice, was purely beautiful, even without a dazzling aura.

The divine sword in his hand hummed softly with each strike, resonating as if excited by a long battle, like an eager beast.

Frankly, Yuder wished he could continue to watch, but he remembered the importance of his role in ensuring Kishiar could keep his complete focus on the battle.

'I've never seen this monster before... but that doesn't mean it's difficult to understand.'

The monster they were facing was quite large. Its body resembled a mud clump rolling downhill, with limbs – or perhaps tails, or squid-like tentacles – protruding long and unclear. The key point was that, despite appearing randomly placed, the limbs clustered in four to five areas.

When assessing a monster, one should first notice such common features. Understanding where the eyes, nose, and mouth are, and identifying unique aspects of its appearance, makes it easier to strategize.

'This one doesn't have a fixed position for eyes, nose, or mouth on each individual. These seem to be less useful organs compared to its limbs. And considering the monster corpse that Kishiar split in half earlier...'

Yuder's gaze returned to the pile of monster carcasses Kishiar had accumulated. Among them, the very first one that Kishiar had slain and split precisely in half revealed something resembling soft bones connected to four clusters of legs, attached to some part inside. Though the halved state made it difficult to discern its original form, a focused look allowed Yuder to somewhat understand its structure.

His eyes, currently shining with a golden hue from exerting power, meticulously scanned that area.

Though he would have preferred a more detailed examination by touch, there was no time for that now. Still, from experience, he was certain that this area was likely a weakness.

'Even the monsters that didn't die immediately when Kishiar split them in half seem to have their core located in a spot he couldn't damage instantly. Instead of targeting the center indiscriminately, I need to identify the point where these leg clusters intersect. Given the randomness of the monster's leg positions, the location of the core must be similarly unpredictable.'

Yuder Aile's attacks hardly affected the monsters.

But his reign as a Cavalry Commander capable of slaying countless monsters was simple. It was his tenacity in observing and re-observing the monsters, which others shunned, to identify their weaknesses and devise methods to defeat them.

Once a weakness was identified, the next step was to prepare weapons capable of indirect attacks and to create, through his power, a terrain advantageous for an assault, corralling the monster into it. It was a trap-like method, perfected through immense capability and thorough preparation.

While he couldn't apply this method now, the information would certainly be helpful to Kishiar.

"Commander! You must target between the clusters of the monster's legs. The core connecting these clusters exists inside the torso, so first identify and attack that spot."

As Yuder relayed this information, he swung his power-infused sword at the monster Kishiar was engaging. Seizing a brief moment when part of the monster's legs were trapped on the ground, he thrust his flame-powered sword into the torso, pushing it away, igniting whatever fur or scales were there, leaving a blackened brand.

A terrible scream filled the air.

'Done.'

As Yuder leaped back upon achieving his goal, Kishiar advanced in turn, precisely targeting the branded area with his sword.

For a fleeting moment, their gazes locked.

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Though the exchange was brief, Yuder was certain of the outcome of his attack.

‘He had cut it perfectly. It's bound to succeed.’

After his sword, wrapped in a blue aura, had passed through, the monster, centered around the mark left by Yuder, split precisely into four pieces and collapsed. Kishiar, who had leaped over the corpse he created, landed smoothly; his cloak billowed and then settled. The fluids from the battle had soiled his once-pristine appearance, yet they did nothing to diminish the man's serene and overwhelming strength.

Shortly after, Kishiar, exhaling briefly, flicked his sword to shed the fluids, and turned to Yuder with a smile.

“...”

Those who witnessed the flawlessly executed joint attack, not prearranged but as if planned, were unable to tear their eyes away from the spectacle, despite knowing they needed to move swiftly. Yuder felt the same.

Kishiar's movements seemed to read his intentions perfectly. No, they definitely did. Even without explicit instructions on where to strike, Kishiar's timely and precise attacks, coinciding with the chilling thrill Yuder felt during their brief gaze, lingered electrifyingly throughout his body.

It was a sensation that could almost be described as exhilarating.

However, the time Kishiar and Yuder could gaze at each other was exceedingly brief. Before they could exchange a word, a Cavalry member, leading the next monster and waving a hand scarred and scraped, called for their attention.

"Next!"

Yuder swiftly sprang into action, taking a deep breath.

But even as he marked the next monster, and then another, the exhilarating sense of control over his body did not completely fade.

Yuder Aile, with his black hair, alternately used various attributes, difficult to discern, to create openings and mark the monsters. Kishiar, without any signal, would then precisely strike the marked spot, efficiently killing the beast.

Mark, kill. And then mark, kill again.

Even as the Cavalry members bringing the next monsters momentarily faltered, or the creatures deviated unexpectedly, they remained unshaken.

The almost miraculous sight irresistibly drew the attention of all present, including those maintaining the perimeter and those from the Star of Nagran's Southern stronghold under surveillance.

“...swordmaster.”

Sera, sitting bound, turned her head to a murmured voice beside her. An Imperial Special Forces soldier, overseeing the captured Awakeners of Star of Nagran, watched the battlefield, his eyes wide with awe and admiration.

"Unbelievable. To think I am seeing this with my own eyes. Duke Peletta a swordmaster..."

"Are you sure about him being a swordmaster? There are others among us who can wield a sword with aura-like power."

Another Imperial soldier asked, keeping his voice low, but his eyes too, remained fixated on Kishiar, who was showing overwhelming prowess without faltering against the monsters.

"Yes. That man is my closest colleague. So, I know better. It's real. Completely different from the power of an Awakener. Don't you feel it too?"

The inquired soldier didn't reply, but his silence was as good as an agreement.

And it was the same for Sera and the others from the Stars of Nagran, an absurd situation, but they too understood the truth in those words.

The Cavalry Commander, Duke of Peletta, Kishiar La Orr, was known to everyone as an Awakener. Similarly, the news of his recent acquisition of the new divine sword was so widely known that there was hardly anyone who didn't know of it.

Yet, no one could have imagined that he was such an extraordinary swordsman and a swordmaster capable of generating a perfect aura. Even while watching, it was hard to believe one's eyes.

The movements of Duke Peletta were nothing like those of mercenaries who boastfully wield swords, nor were they like those of average knights. He seemed as though he had been one with the sword since birth.

Even the strong Cavalry members, who had captured Sera and her colleagues without allowing them to properly resist, found themselves struggling against the monster. Yet Kishiar, facing the same beast, showed no difficulty in his swordplay.

His sword strikes were not flashy or hesitant, but simply cut through, again and again.

Whatever his sword touched, it cleanly severed. Even the tough shells that other attacks could barely scratch, and the insides that seemed soft yet tenaciously caught allies, stood no chance against Kishiar's strikes.

The act of cutting.

It was the first time she truly felt the essence and identity of a sword being so vividly demonstrated in its simplicity.

And that's why it was frightening.

The more one saw of this being, accomplishing the seemingly trivial yet unbelievable, the more overwhelmingly terrifying it became, the unknown within it becoming more apparent.

Every citizen of the Orr Empire grows up hearing tales of the owners of the divine sword. Most of the chosen wielders of the divine sword Orr were renowned swordmasters, possessing skills and stature fitting for the sword.

Seeing him now, no one could doubt that he was the new owner of the divine sword.

She bit her lip in fear. Even in the chaotic situation created by the sudden appearance of monsters, the enemies who had perfectly subdued them and brought them here were far more formidable than they were. The fact that there were injured among Sera and her colleagues but no fatalities, despite their desperate struggle, was proof enough. After all, capturing enemies unharmed is known to be twice as difficult as killing them.

But what frustrated her more was something else - the familiar faces among the Imperial soldiers monitoring them.

'Why are those who disappeared from our base here...?'

Sera had thought those who fled from the southern base were not worth her concern. Maybe if the Sage had ordered their retrieval, things might have been different, but in the current situation, communication was not easy.

Not wanting to take on more responsibility by chasing after them, she had focused on stabilizing the base with the southern merchants, never imagining it would come back to haunt her like this.

The trusted southern merchants died too easily, and her colleagues who trusted and followed her were captured disgracefully. The Awakeners from the central base, captured with her, seemed to regard the southern base Awakeners, including Sera, as traitors who acted against the Sage's will, refusing even to meet their eyes.

Their attitude only worsened after seeing Sera's surprised reaction to the recently-passed-the-test Cavalry trainees who had originally escaped the southern base.

Even the recently-passed-the-test Cavalry trainees did not give Sera a proper answer about the current situation. They simply looked at her pitifully, yet coldly, saying, 'We are now part of the Cavalry, and we do not wish to speak with you any further.'

Having only saved her own life, everything was a mess. She wondered where it all went wrong.

Did the Sage know about all this? And the southern merchants who had died without a word?

Amidst the confusion and regret, Sera looked for any opportunity to escape.

It seemed unlikely that the Duke of Peletta could handle the vast and mighty monsters alone for long.

Indeed, his movements had slowed down a bit since the ninth monster. It had started after he narrowly deflected an attack aimed at Yuder Aile by a transformed leg of the monster, grazing his arm in the process.

Those who had expected Yuder to easily handle the attack without the Duke's intervention were surprised by his choice to intervene, but fortunately, it seemed not to be a serious injury, and the confusion soon settled.

Following this, Yuder Aile began to move more fiercely, and so far, their counterattacks hadn't shown any significant vulnerabilities.

However, the scorched sleeve of his once white garment, now turned black, was notably visible. The force behind their monster-slaying hadn't weakened, but everyone knew it wasn't good to prolong the fight.

Still, the Duke of Peletta and Yuder Aile were managing well, unlike other Cavalry members who were visibly struggling more with the remaining monsters. The number of perilous moments, when they almost got seriously injured failing to block the monsters' attacks, was increasing. It was a clear sign that their stamina was reaching its limits.

If things continued this way, the formation might break, or some would have to retreat, requiring backup. In the ensuing chaos, it seemed possible to find a chance to escape.

‘Just a little longer...’

Sera watched the monsters held by the Cavalry members, looking for an indirect way to exert her power. Just as she was about to turn to a colleague who could help, a slight breeze blew from somewhere.

Moments later, a fresh surge of energy passed over their heads, and the part of the monster facing Kishiar was cleanly sliced off.

Amidst the surprise, someone landed from a high point before them.

It was a knight with distinctly southern features and a cold face.

“...Sir Zuckerman!”

Someone called out with evident relief. The southern knight didn't respond to the voice calling him, focusing only on the Duke and Yuder Aile. Taking advantage of the monster's halt from being sliced, Kishiar, stabbed and killed it. He then took the opportunity of the time until the next monster arrived to stop and turn his head. Yuder Aile beside him did the same.

"Nathan. You've finally arrived."

"Yes. Adjutant Nathan Zuckerman, reporting back now."

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"Yes. Adjutant Nathan Zuckerman, reporting back now."

The exchange between the lord and his adjutant was strikingly calm, making it difficult to discern whether they were in the midst of a perilous battle against monsters in the city or in a peaceful indoor setting.

However, those who had witnessed what Nathan Zuckerman had just done were silently doubting their eyes. And for good reason, as the attack Zuckerman had just unleashed was not something an ordinary knight could perform.

"Wait a minute. Didn't the attack by Sir Zuckerman look like an aura? Could it be... that Sir Zuckerman is an Awakener like us?"

"Shouldn't the first question be whether he was a swordmaster?"

The murmuring Cavalry members were soon joined by the Imperial Army, exchanging words with excited expressions.

"I knew from the underground arena that this knight's skills were extraordinary. But a knight who can use aura... Could he actually be a true swordmaster?"

"If that's the case, it would be quite a sensation."

"Regardless, the important thing is that we no longer need to worry about that monster!"

True to their words, Nathan Zuckerman immediately joined the battle upon assessing the situation. His role was not to relieve Kishiar, but to support the Cavalry members who were struggling to maintain a defensive formation.

His sword no longer glowed blue, but it was enough. Just the addition of one man's strength made it significantly easier for the Cavalry members to combat the monsters compared to before.

When only two monsters remained, Kishiar and Nathan each took one as if by agreement. A few with an eye for swordsmanship realized that the sword techniques of the two men were quite similar.

This was because Nathan Zuckerman had learned swordsmanship from his lord, but no one had realized that yet.

Yuder Aile, along with the other Cavalry members, supported the two swordsmen, using various attributes generously. To onlookers, it seemed as if his presence alone created more opportunities and lured the monsters better than the entire Cavalry combined.

Yuder Aile, who had successfully marked the vital parts of the monsters while dodging them, leaped high into the air, stepping on the wind. The monsters' legs stretched out unnaturally long in a last-ditch effort to catch his ankles but stiffened in a twitch.

It was because Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman had simultaneously pierced and sliced through the bodies of the two monsters.

One monster immediately lost strength in the leg that had reached for Yuder, falling like a pruned branch. However, the other was different. Its leg stretched abnormally long in a desperate attempt to strike at Yuder.

It was a similar situation to when Kishiar had been grazed by an attack. But this time, there was no time for Kishiar to intervene.

Just when everyone anticipated a minor injury to Yuder, something astonishing happened.

"Ah...!"

Yuder Aile swiftly twisted his body in mid-air, shooting wind downwards. As he changed his position, the monster's leg aiming for his ankle hopelessly entangled itself around Yuder's sword.

With a chillingly fierce look in his eyes, Yuder tightly gripped it and shouted.

"Cavalry! All-out attack!"

At his command, all the Cavalry members reflexively exerted their power. It was a reflex born of constant drilling, but the result was definitive.

An intertwining of forces beyond comprehension struck directly at the monster's body and the leg that had ensnared Yuder's sword.

Then Kishiar La Orr seized the opportunity, unleashing his aura in a powerful strike that shredded what remained of the monster's flesh.

After the blinding light that swept through, too intense to keep one's eyes open, passed, a powerful voice echoed through the dust and monster fluid-covered area.

"...I confirm that the last monster has been dealt with. Everyone, you have worked hard."

"Ah...!"

Upon hearing Kishiar's voice, those around finally collapsed in their places, panting heavily. Someone shouted in triumph, raising their weapon towards the sky.

"Wooh!"

"We did it! We really did it!"

Nobody had died. There was no civilian casualty, nor any collateral damage such as building collapses.

The outcome, unbelievable for a monster battle in the heart of the city, filled everyone with joy.

"..."

Yuder watched Kishiar's back as he observed the rejoicing people. Kishiar's golden hair, caked with black monster fluid and dust, and his sweaty nape seemed unfamiliar yet oddly fitting.

Just before, he had been infuriated to the point of turning white, but now, looking at his back, Yuder was reminded of the Harvest Festival. Then, Kishiar had stood alone, dressed in dazzling formal attire, appearing both terribly lonely and unaffected, his expression inscrutable like a solid mask.

But now, his back seemed entirely different, though he was the same person. He stood like a great tree among the people trusting and cheering for him. His dirty, disheveled appearance and clothing suited him better than the splendid formal attire. Although only his back was visible, and his facial expression unknown, the movement of his shoulders and back with every command and breath was enough to surmise his emotions.

It was the back of a man physically exhausted but emotionally feeling the tangible result of a battle and victory achieved by his own hands. The sensation of boiling blood not yet cooled was all too familiar to Yuder.

"...Phew."

Yuder exhaled deeply and sheathed his dirty sword. Just then, someone beside him spoke.

"A strange crack and monsters in the middle of the city. Looks like we won't be able to leave here for a while."

"...Yes. It seems our stay will be longer than planned, so I'm thinking of contacting the North."

Yuder replied, turning his head. Nathan Zuckerman, equally covered in monster fluid and looking quite a mess, quietly met his gaze.

What was going through his mind was unknown, but one thing was clear. Yuder knew he had to apologize for not properly utilizing the opportunity Zuckerman had personally conceded.

"I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"I was here, yet Commander got injured. I have no words."

Would Kishiar have gone to such lengths to block the monster if it had been Nathan there instead of Yuder? Yuder thought not. So, this was entirely his fault.

Yuder recalled the moment Kishiar's arm was hit. It was dreadful. He had never felt so infuriated in this life for being almost unable to attack the monster directly.

Nathan Zuckerman's head turned slightly. He noticed that one of Kishiar's sleeves was charred black and melting away as Kishiar continued to issue follow-up instructions to the members and others. Then, he turned back to Yuder and spoke.

"Do you think I am disappointed because of that?"

"Isn't that the case?"

"Well, looking at our lord's current state, it seems that what I hoped for when I first sent Sir Aile to him has already been sufficiently fulfilled."

Yuder frowned briefly, puzzled by what Kishiar's injury meant in this context. He then considered that Nathan Zuckerman's words might be a form of consolation.

"...I'm not sure what you mean, but an injury is still an injury. Once he finishes giving instructions, I will take care of the rest. Please, Sir Zuckerman, accompany the Commander inside and see to his condition."

"I agree with your sentiment, but I'm not sure if that will be possible."

Before Yuder could ask what he meant, Nathan Zuckerman preempted his question with an answer.

"I suspect our lord will give me the exact opposite order. When you changed direction abruptly in the air, I saw your right hand twist awkwardly. Doesn't it hurt?"

Yuder looked down at his right hand, which still throbbed faintly after sheathing his sword. As Nathan said, in the last moment, when he had explosively reversed direction in the air using the power of the wind, his right hand, holding the sword, had twisted slightly. The strain had probably worsened when he used his strength to keep hold of his sword, ensnared by the monster's leg. However, Yuder didn't consider it a serious injury.

But as Yuder was about to respond, Kishiar, who had turned his head as if he had sensed their conversation, spoke to them.

"Nathan. Take Yuder inside first and have his right hand checked."

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"Nathan. Take Yuder inside first and have his right hand checked."

Nathan Zuckerman blinked as if asking if he had seen it too. He had the knack of conveying his intentions clearly with an impassive face.

Yuder acknowledged that he, indeed, has an exceptional ability to read the minds of Kishiar, befitting an old adjutant. However, that didn't mean he planned to leave Nathan Zuckerman to follow that order. Yuder immediately spoke up.

"My hand is fine. Shouldn't we prioritize examining the Commander's arm instead?"

"I've already given it a temporary fix."

Kishiar gestured with one hand, directing the Cavalry members elsewhere, and replied calmly. There was no need to ask when he had done this, as both Yuder and Nathan Zuckerman knew that Kishiar possessed divine powers.

However, people with divine power can only temporarily mend their own wounds. Stopping the bleeding might be feasible, but the healing ends once their own strength and energy diminish.

"That's good. It seems appropriate for you to see a priest or physician now."

"I've bought myself enough time not to do that. There are many urgent matters to address right now, so it's more logical for those in immediate need to receive treatment first."

"No. There is no one who would seek treatment before the person they serve."

"There could be situations where that's possible."

Kishiar, with a twisted smile, gestured towards a spot. There, injured Cavalry members were gathered, attending to each other's wounds and wrapping bandages brought from the branch office. Some, who appeared more severely injured, were being assisted to move, evidently following Kishiar's recent order to prioritize their treatment.

Yuder, anticipating such a response, remained determined.

‘...’

Though slightly overwhelmed, he didn't give up. Yuder tried to persuade Kishiar again. Meanwhile, Nathan Zuckerman had briefly left and returned, but Yuder paid no attention to that.

“So.....”

Just as Yuder was about to speak again, a large hand casually grasped his shoulder, blocking him. The person stepping forward was Nathan Zuckerman.

"Listening to this, it seems like the conversation is being prolonged over a simple solution."

"Do you have another plan?"

"Yes. I just briefly checked outside the encirclement, and it seems a guest worthy of the Duke's attention has arrived. I'll handle things here, so please escort the Duke there and get treated on the way. That will solve all problems."

Nathan Zuckerman added an explanation, as if understanding what Yuder was about to say.

"Although I'm not part of the Cavalry, I've dealt with post-monster incidents several times in Peletta. I don't think this place requires a different approach. As for other urgent matters, our lord must have already given orders, and for the rest, it's just a matter of coordinating with others."

Nathan Zuckerman, as the representative of the Peletta Knights and Kishiar's adjutant, had worked closely on many occasions. Thus, he was familiar with all the Cavalry members here.

Surprisingly, he too was undoubtedly capable of handling this situation.

'But Nathan Zuckerman staying behind alone, leaving an injured Kishiar in this situation?'

It seemed unbelievable, but then again, that knight had already made a similar choice before.

"...Are you truly not angry that Kishiar was injured despite sending me ahead?"

Nathan Zuckerman had claimed not to be angry, but Yuder hadn't believed he was sincere. However, if he truly wasn't... At that moment, when Yuder's expression subtly shifted, Kishiar burst into laughter.

"Indeed, Nathan, a wise suggestion that saves time and satisfies everyone."

"Yes. And I am unharmed and perfectly fine."

"Alright, I'll follow your advice."

Thus, Yuder found himself accompanying Kishiar. It all happened so quickly, leaving no room for further discussion.

Outside the still-maintained encirclement by the Imperial Army, it was quite chaotic. There were people who had evacuated because of the Star of Nagan, a few soldiers and knights in the uniform of the security force, a handful of crazed onlookers, and others insistently trying to push their way through.

'Well, I had anticipated this.'

Yuder's gaze shifted to a carriage stopped behind the chaotic crowd. The carriage, bearing the crest of the Herne family, was familiar.

'As expected. That's why Nathan Zuckerman said that.'

As if sensing his gaze, the door opened, and Myra El Herne, the First Princess of Herne, stepped out. Unlike before, she approached them quickly without wearing a robe to cover her face. The knights following her quickened their pace in response.

The Herne family's influence in the South wasn't as strong as the Tain family in the West, but it was still significant. People, realizing someone of importance had arrived, quietly made way. Myra, with a pale face, spoke as she approached.

"I saw a large monster falling from the sky while returning to my quarters after talking with the knights. I immediately turned my carriage here, but they wouldn't let me in, saying it was dangerous."

"That's so. I'm sorry about that. We needed to block access around here because a battle was underway," Kishiar replied.

Myra, biting her lip, observed Yuder's disheveled appearance and Kishiar, who was also in a notably bad state. She seemed to have many questions, but quickly realized it wasn't appropriate to discuss more in such a public place.

Instead, she asked just one more question, loud enough for the anxious people around to hear.

"So, is everything under control inside? Have all the monsters been dealt with?"

"Yes. We've taken care of them all. We're currently dealing with the corpses. There's not much destruction, so once the cleanup is done, everyone can return."

"That's a relief."

People around who heard the conversation between Kishiar and Myra murmured among themselves.

"Did you hear? No major damage!"

"How could there be no damage with such huge monsters falling?"

"Are they really saying there's no damage?..."

"And the Cavalry at the arena..."

"The Cavalry..."

As the cavalry's name echoed around and the crowd grew louder, they moved inside the branch office.

Myra's expression turned to shock at the sight of the craters, dismembered corpses, and black fluids that filled the scene.

"Truly... the Cavalry killed them all. So many and so large, and so quickly..."

Hearing it was one thing, but seeing the actual battlefield was evidently a different experience. The knights accompanying her, previously brimming with arrogance, quickly quieted down as well.

Kishiar responded with a quiet smile.

"I've only done what needed to be done."

"In fact, I came with the knights to offer assistance, but it seems that was unnecessary."

"We still need help, actually. We're short on hands for the cleanup."

"Then use the people I've brought with me. Do you need a priest as well?"

"Did you bring a priest too?"

"I summoned a priestess on the way here, so she should be arriving soon."

"She will arrive quicker than those we would have called."

"Moreover, she is discreet enough to be trusted with treatment. She is not from the Herne family but connected to me. The Empress herself knows who she is, so you can be at ease."

In a foreign land with few acquaintances, such aid was most valuable. Finding someone to trust with treatment in a place lacking local natives or influential families was a considerable challenge, especially when injured.

Kishiar seemed well aware of this, his smile growing a bit broader.

"It seems we have formed a beneficial alliance. I'll gratefully accept your help."

"Thanks to the Cavalry swiftly dealing with those dreadful monsters, Charloin remained unharmed and peaceful. If anything, I too have received help, so it's only right that I do my part."

Her demeanor was remarkably steadfast, considering she had just seen her brother's corpse. Her ability to prioritize what she must protect over her personal feelings, thinking first of the people of the South, was impressive.

If such a person had been the Duke of Herne, perhaps the great earthquake in the South in his previous life wouldn't have led to such devastating consequences.

It wasn't long before the priestess Myra had summoned appeared. A middle-aged woman in priestly robes, she seemed slightly surprised at the assembly of people waiting inside the branch office, but quickly composed herself and spoke.

"I am Galleum, a priestess from the Charloin Mataroa village branch. Who needs my assistance?"

"Right here," Yuder pointed to Kishiar without hesitation. Kishiar raised his eyebrows slightly, as if he was a bit late in responding, but he didn't refuse the treatment.

Kishiar removed his outer garment and rolled up his sleeves, revealing long, black marks that seemed to have been left by a worm's trail. These were scars from a monster's leg, which had melted both the fabric and his skin. The charred, blackened skin was swollen, looking as if it had been crudely stitched back together.

Although there was no bleeding, the wound's peculiar appearance suggested it was far from healed.

'Is this a trace of emergency treatment using divine power?' thought Galleum, a priestess who had introduced herself as such. Her keen eyes narrowed upon seeing the mark, recognizing it as the work of divine power.

Under normal circumstances, anyone would wonder why they were summoned when another priest had clearly been there before. But Galleum simply took a deep breath and remained silent.

Indeed, she was the 'discreet individual' confidently recommended by Lady Myra, the First Princess.

"It seems to have been grazed by a monster's attack. It appears to have some toxicity."

"Yes. You might feel some pain while I channel the divine power. If it becomes unbearable, please let me know."

Without asking the identity of the handsome man with golden hair and red eyes before her, Galleum immediately began to summon her divine power. A bright white light gathered in her hands and soon cascaded over the wound, illuminating the area.

Kishiar watched silently as his wound transformed, the flesh regenerating anew. Contrary to expectations of pain, his expression remained unchanged.

"It's all done. The wound may look clean, but it's freshly healed and very fragile. I advise you to avoid any strain for a few days."

"Your skill is remarkable. I'm grateful," Kishiar said, his face breaking into a picture-perfect smile. Indeed, Galleum's divine power was impressive, rivaling that of the priests in the capital.

"Now, could you also look at his right hand? It seems to have been strained during the battle."

Kishiar, having just received treatment, nonchalantly grasped Yuder's hand and presented it to Galleum. Yuder remained quiet, not uttering a word.

Galleum hesitated upon seeing Yuder's hand covered by a black glove.

"The glove might obscure a proper assessment of the injury. Would you prefer to receive treatment with it on?"

Her consideration for Yuder's potential predicaments once again demonstrated her exemplary nature as a priestess.

'What should I do?'

As Yuder hesitated, Myra quickly stood up.

"It seems time for me to relay instructions to those I brought for cleanup. I have separate matters to discuss with the other priests who followed Priestess Galleum. I'll step out for a moment."

Sensing that Yuder's reluctance to remove his glove was due to the gaze of others, she tactfully took the two knights guarding her and left the room.

Yuder's glove hid his hand, marked with dark red veins – a nuisance to explain to others. But seeing the lengths they went to for his comfort, he felt no need to endure the inconvenience of being treated with his glove on. Trusting a priestess of Galleum's character, who would neither pry for explanations nor leak information carelessly, Yuder slowly pulled off his glove.

Galleum, upon seeing the dark red, branch-like veins stretching from Yuder's hand to his sleeve, predictably refrained from any unnecessary questions.

"Could you please specify where exactly you feel discomfort?"

"Please look at the wrist joint, not the skin."

Galleum nodded in understanding when Yuder explained that the injury occurred while wielding a weapon and abruptly changing direction.

"The area around your wrist is indeed quite swollen. Understood."

She pressed around Yuder's wrist several times to assess the condition and then infused it with divine power. After a cool, refreshing sensation passed, Yuder felt the swelling in his wrist significantly reduce.

Even after rotating his wrist several times, he felt no discomfort.

"Is there any other discomfort?" she asked.

"No, thank you."

Upon receiving his gratitude, Galleum's expression finally softened a bit.

"I am pleased to be able to offer even a small help to those who fought selflessly to protect Charloin."

"I will certainly remember Priestess Galleum's assistance and ensure proper recompense in the future," Kishiar responded.

Galleum shook her head at Kishiar's words, adding that she hadn't come seeking remembrance.

"Is the treatment complete?"

Not long after, Myra returned, now alone without the knights who had been following her.

"Galleum, I've asked the other priests who came with you to tend to the other injured here. There are no serious injuries, but many are exhausted. Could you continue to assist with this for the day?"

"Of course, First Princess. As a follower of the divine, it is my duty to help without being asked."

Galleum stood up, bowed politely, and then left the room.

After waiting until Galleum's footsteps faded away, Myra sat down across from Kishiar with a more relaxed demeanor.

"Now that we're free from prying eyes, we can talk more comfortably. What exactly happened to the Cavalry after we parted ways?"

"It's a bit of a long story."

Kishiar recounted how he was ambushed on his way back, the sudden emergence of a strange crack above a building, and the monsters that poured out from it. Despite summarizing, the enormity of the situation was clear in his retelling. Myra's expression turned serious, especially when Kishiar mentioned, "I sent people to watch over Baron Conche's house. We managed to capture the servant of the Second Prince, who was still alive, his horse, and some suspicious individuals."

"You managed to capture all of them, including the servant and the horse? How did you do it so quickly..."

"It seemed doable, so we did it," Kishiar replied nonchalantly.

Yuder quietly looked down, feeling a bit odd hearing how matter-of-factly Kishiar spoke of such feats.

The conversation then shifted to the root cause of all these events, involving the Star of Nagran and the Southern merchants.

"The Star of Nagran, a group of Awakeners, tried to infiltrate our Cavalry by planting spies. We've been aware of them for a while, so this wasn't surprising. We can handle this matter on our own, so the First Princess need not worry too much. However, the situation with the Southern merchants is a bit different."

Kishiar briefly explained the Southern merchants and their trial involving Tain Duke. Myra acknowledged that she had heard about the Duke being misled by Southern merchants.

She was shocked to learn that these merchants were not only active here but also suspected to be the true culprits behind her brother, the Second Prince's death.

"Do you mean to say that these Southerners conspired with Baron Conche to destabilize the succession of Herne?"

"It's the most logical conclusion, considering that a year ago, through an introduction by Baron Conche, they infiltrated as a servant to the Second Prince, gaining his trust before orchestrating today's events."

The exact time they had allied with Baron Conche was unknown. It could have been even before they tampered with Duke Tain. Myra's expression hardened as she likely pondered the same timeline.

"I never thought Baron Conche capable of harboring such foolish yet dangerous intentions. It seems we were greatly underestimated. After Ashrav, I was probably their next target, wasn't I?"

The previous Myra, in her former life, might have realized this malicious intent much later.

But not this time. Myra, with her sharp intellect, quickly deduced that the target of these conspirators extended beyond Prince Ashrav.

Her eyes, clenched in determination, sharpened like a razor-edged blade.

"Then I cannot delay any longer. Since you've captured the traitors on the spot, I must head to Baron Conche's estate right away."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

"Thank you for your concern, but some matters, no matter how difficult, cannot be postponed. These traitors not only betrayed the Herne family but also risked the safety of all Charloin. To show everyone the extent of their crimes and their consequences, I must go now."

Kishiar smiled at her and spoke.

"I understand your resolve, and I admire it. In that case, I will provide some Cavalry members and special forces from the Imperial Army to assist you."

"There's no need to go to such lengths, knowing how busy you are here..."

"Being busy is one thing, but the safety of an ally is equally important. Any harm to the First Princess would no longer be just her concern alone. I want to make that clear."

Myra was now alone. With the death of Ashrav, the Second Prince, her path to succession seemed smooth, provided no issues arose concerning her.

However, if problems emerged before she could become the successor, the situation would drastically change. When Kishiar pointed out this risk, Myra nodded in agreement, not adding any further words.

"The First Princess has generously provided priests and priestesses and knights to support us; it's only right that we do the same. Don't worry about it."

"Understood. Thank you."

Myra gracefully rose and offered a formal farewell. As she left the room, her stride was devoid of any hesitation.

Once the room quieted down, Yuder turned to Kishiar. He wanted to ask if Kishiar was alright or if there were any other issues, but there were more pressing matters to discuss.

"With things having come to this, it seems impossible to visit the northern branch before the end of the second batch of recruitment entrance tests."

"That's likely. I didn't expect the Southern merchants to ensnare us this way."

"I'll handle communication with the north. And..."

"You were going to say we need more help to deal with and investigate these people, right? We'll need more than just those here, so we should request additional support from the headquarters."

"Yes."

Kishiar had already guessed what Yuder was about to say. Yuder thought of those back in the capital and what they could offer.

"We'll definitely need Kanna, and bringing in more whose natives of the southern region would be beneficial."

"If the situation drags on, calling in an apothecary might be wise. His extensive knowledge proved helpful in the West, after all."

"Yes. And also..."

"Oh, wait. A messenger bird has arrived."

Kishiar raised his hand to pause the conversation and stood up to open the window. The bird fluttered in, its legs bound with a cylinder larger than usual, seemingly carrying twice the usual amount of letters.

Kishiar's expression shifted slightly as he examined the outer surface of the cylinder.

"Is this a report from headquarters? I should look into this right away."

Chapter 736

Kishiar's expression shifted slightly as he examined the outer surface of the cylinder.

"Is this a report from headquarters? I should look into this right away."

Typically, Kishiar would first read reports alone, then decide whether to share them with others. However, this time, he beckoned Yuder closer before breaking the seal.

"Can I read it with you?"

"If it's from the Cavalry, we both need to see it. It's more efficient to read it together than separately."

After saying this, he leaned in closer, lowering his voice as if sharing a secret.

"...And using this as an excuse to be closer is my little scheme."

Suddenly, Yuder became acutely aware of their touching arms and hands. The man, smiling mischievously like a playful boy, embraced Yuder's shoulder, drawing him closer. Their temples lightly touched.

"It might be impolite to behave this way in our unkempt state... but there's no time to clean up, so we must make do. Please overlook it."

Though Kishiar spoke as if he alone was disheveled, Yuder, who had been rolling in the dirt, was actually dirtier. Yet, Kishiar seemed unconcerned, true to his character.

Yuder felt a mix of relief and amusement, realizing that Kishiar harbored similar desires, albeit managing to satisfy both his whims and duties.

Held in the embrace, Yuder gazed down at their clasped hands, slowly relaxing.

"There's no need to be polite. I'm not exactly pristine myself."

A brief conversation and close contact were all it took for Yuder to feel a release of tension he'd been holding in his body, ready to react at any moment.

Kishiar, seemingly more aware of this than Yuder, unfolded the report with a melting smile.

"Let's see what the dust-covered pair of us have been sent. I hope it's not bad news."

The report from the Cavalry headquarters was penned by Ever. She had written about recent events and progress in a forceful hand, including a concise greeting.

The report included details about the pursuit of those who fled after an explosion in the capital, caused by Nahan and the Sage. It also mentioned Kanna overseeing the interrogation of captured Awakeners and the opening of the Cavalry's first interrogation facility for Awakeners.

'I wonder if Nahan headed south. It's uncertain whether he'll return to the southern base or go elsewhere... but somehow, I have a feeling he might come back here. I should prepare for that.'

However, the subsequent news in the report was surprising.

'The Emperor has surmised that Baron Renbow might encounter the hidden Sage in Fourth Wall District? So, he told them to investigate and then they selected personnel skilled in disguise and tracking, but given the characteristics of Fourth Wall District... Wait. Why does this name appear here?'

Yuder momentarily doubted his eyesight when an unexpected name suddenly popped up. Even after blinking several times and re-reading, the name written there was definitely that of the fool Yuder knew.

"I never expected to see the name Kiolle da Diarca here," Yuder remarked, a sentiment echoed by Kishiar who stood beside him, chuckling in mild disbelief.

"Having a capable assistant, unexpected help sometimes comes from the most unexpected places. Of all the news I heard today, this is the most interesting."

Yuder remained silent, opting instead to reread the section he had hastily skimmed over.

It began thus:

We learned that the Fourth Wall District, Baron Renbow's destination, is frequented by nobles on excursions. We believed he would likely choose either a secluded forest or lake for clandestine meetings, and indeed, he headed towards the lake. However, we didn't anticipate the presence of a certain unexpected figure there...

—

Ever, since arriving in the capital, felt a thrill at heading to an unexplored destination, discreetly observing her companions. There were seven in total on this mission, including her as the leader.

The team consisted of Hinn Eldore, Finn Eldore, Gakane Bolunwald, Pruelle Van Tain and his brother Nipollen Van Tain (who was now more than a temporary member), and lastly, Revlin Shand Apeto. Nipollen, transformed into a cat and nestled in a small bag, made them appear as only six.

They were en route to the Tain family's private property in the Fourth Wall District, provided by Pruelle for disguise purposes.

"We're here," announced Pruelle as they disembarked the carriage near a beautiful, traditionally styled building. A statue bearing the distinct mark of the Tain family stood imposingly, welcoming guests.

"Thanks to Priscilla's arrangements, the place should be empty now. Please, enter at your leisure."

Ever and Gakane felt a sense of responsibility, while Hinn and Finn crossed the threshold with the excitement of children discovering new toys. Revlin Shand Apeto entered nonchalantly, accustomed to such opulence.

"Oh, look! You can see the entire lake from here!"

"Where? It's true!"

Hinn and Finn exclaimed, mesmerized by the view upon entering the villa. Pruelle laughed, relaxed and at ease.

"Yes. That's why I chose this location. There aren't many safe spots where you can see the entire lake."

Ever had immediately thought of Pruelle for advice upon hearing about Baron Renbow's journey to the Fourth Wall District.

Pruelle, the eldest son of a major noble family, could have been the heir if he wished. Yet, he was remarkably humble and kind. He never once behaved in a way that made others uncomfortable due to his background during his time adapting to the Cavalry, nor did he ever complain about the communal living that must have been uncomfortable for someone of his upbringing.

Even Revlin, who had struggled to shed the refined lifestyle ingrained since childhood, found Pruelle's adaptability remarkable.

Pruelle, who had previously been on a mission with Ever in the West, seemed to feel a particular closeness to her, often coming to her with questions when curious. Thanks to this, Ever became quite familiar with talking to him, to the point where she didn't feel burdened to seek his help when needed.

"Need information for tracking nobility in Fourth Wall District? Hmm... not many commoners visit there without a reason. Perhaps, we could disguise ourselves as if visiting a place I know? Including Revlin, who shares my status, would arouse no suspicion," Pruelle suggested.

Initially hesitant, upon arriving at the villa, they realized Pruelle's suggestion was apt. The location couldn't be more suitable.

"But... is the lake always this deserted?" asked Gakane, somewhat strained, as he gazed into the distance, unsure whether being hassled on each arm by Hinn and Finn was a torment or a sign of affection. Revlin was the first to respond.

"Uh... no. The lake is as popular as the forest. It's not like there are no people to the extent that it's noticeable... but really, there's no one?"

"Is the noble we're pursuing powerful enough to clear out everyone around the lake?" Hinn Eldore inquired, but no one could answer. They knew that wasn't the case, but the emptiness was indeed peculiar.

Pruelle, looking gravely at the deserted lakeside, gently set down the kitten and spoke up.

"I'll go out and investigate."

"Alone? Are you sure that's safe?"

"I'll use my abilities. It won't take long. Please wait."

Closing his eyes, Pruelle's form blurred like a mirage, then transformed into an unfamiliar young noble. Those witnessing his shapeshifting for the first time watched in awe. He flashed a smile and bid them farewell.

"I've borrowed the appearance of one of my relatives for a moment. I'll be back soon."

True to his word, Pruelle returned shortly with the information they needed.

"Knights are blocking access to the area around the lake. They were from the Diarca family."

Chapter 737

"Knights are blocking access to the area around the lake. They were from the Diarca family."

"Diarca?" she inquired.

"Yes. It wasn't just any member of the Diarca family; there's only one who could do this. The Duke of Diarca himself."

Everyone was taken aback. They had come in pursuit of Baron Renbow, but the sudden appearance of the influential Duke of Diarca was unforeseen.

Ever recalled the information that Baron Renbow was one of the nobles who followed the Duke of Diarca. The Emperor had anticipated that the fleeing sage would meet with Baron Renbow, but to find the Duke of Diarca at the very location towards which Renbow was headed was indeed surprising.

It seemed too connected to be a mere coincidence.

"Ever, what should we do?" Gakane asked, his eyes mirroring her thoughts.

Even if they found Baron Renbow, the presence of the Duke of Diarca at the same location would make it difficult for them to approach. It was even more likely if Baron Renbow and the sage were planning to meet the Duke.

But difficulty did not mean impossibility.

The fact that it wasn't impossible meant there was no reason to give up.

Thus, Ever decided not to retreat. As any member of the Cavalry would think, they had a chance. Her eyes sharpened as she spoke.

"The Emperor's command was to pursue Baron Renbow, but the underlying reason was to capture the sage. Therefore, our primary concern isn't the Duke of Diarca or Baron Renbow. It's finding the sage and his party."

Silence followed.

"I believe Baron Renbow and the sage have come to meet the Duke of Diarca to find a solution to the current situation. If that's the case, the sage must be somewhere around here, right?"

"We're going to find them, then," Gakane stated, understanding her intent. Ever nodded.

"Exactly. If we combine the strength of everyone here, it's definitely possible. Of course, it'll be more dangerous than initially anticipated. If anyone wants to opt out, say it now."

The members exchanged glances. Then, confident yet tense smiles spread across their faces.

"No one would."

Naturally, no one expressed a desire to leave.

Pruelle and Revlin, although they had led somewhat different lives from typical nobility, were not devoid of noble understanding. Particularly Revlin, who had lived in the capital all his life, astutely analyzed the situation.

"The knights won't guard the lakeside indefinitely. The Duke of Diarca likely ordered a temporary restriction to ensure nothing was amiss before using the lake. Since it's a spot frequented by nobles, even someone of the Duke's stature can't block it for hours on end."

"I see."

"Once the knights lift the restriction and others start entering the lakeside, we should blend in. If we keep an eye on the Duke's party, Baron Renbow and the sage will surely appear, especially if their goal is to meet with the Duke."

Everyone agreed with Revlin's sensible conclusion. The Eldore siblings laughed wildly and playfully slung an arm around Revlin's shoulder.

"Exactly. If our target seems to be the Duke, it's easier to wait at the final destination rather than stirring up everywhere! Smart thinking."

"Ha... Thank you for the compliment."

"But still, you need to raise your voice more."

The Eldore siblings and Revlin whispered amongst themselves, sharing jokes in a casual manner. Their camaraderie had grown thanks to a sense of kinship among the few teenagers in the group during his time as a temporary member.

Ever surmised that Revlin, who had faced many challenges and was still under the scrutiny of his older brother, could brighten up in this manner thanks largely to the uninhibited influence of the boisterous Eldore siblings.

It was a heartwarming sight, but as her gaze shifted to the lake outside the window, her smile faded.

"Just as Revlin said, people are starting to enter the lakeside," she observed. "Let's get ready, everyone. We'll divide into groups to monitor the area and share information."

Ever split the party into three groups. First, Revlin and the Eldore siblings, donning hats to lightly conceal their hair and features, headed to the lakeside, acting like carefree young nobles.

Following at intervals, Pruelle, transformed into a noblewoman and cradling her cat Nipollen, set out accompanied by Ever, dressed as a plainclothes bodyguard armed with a sword. The idea was that a man holding a cat accompanied by a female escort was a strange sight enough to attract attention, but there was nothing special about a noblewoman doing the same thing.

Gakane, the last of the group, stayed near Pruelle's mansion, his body hidden by a shadow clone. From this vantage point, he could quickly spot and assist any team member in danger.

"The sun's a bit harsh for winter. I think I need a parasol," Pruelle remarked, naturally playing the part of a graceful noblewoman.

"Of course, my lady," Ever responded, as she shielded Pruelle's head with a parasol, scanning their surroundings. The scenic lakeside, bustling with nobles enjoying leisurely walks or relaxing afternoons, was a world apart from the bustling Seventh Wall District where the Cavalry headquarters was located.

The Duke of Diarca was undoubtedly somewhere around, but the large lake, dotted with trees perfect for concealment, made it challenging to spot him immediately. As Ever surveyed the area, she was caught off guard by a voice and lowered her eyes beneath the parasol she was holding.

"Don't look around too much. The essence of being an escort is to never take your eyes off the person you're protecting."

"Ah! I'm sorry. Was I too noticeable?"

"It's hard to miss someone like Miss Beck. I'll watch for you, so don't worry too much."

Pruelle's voice, though delicate and sharp, was filled with assurance. Knowing who it was, yet hearing such a drastically different manner of speaking, felt like interacting with a completely different person.

Pruelle's ability to transform into a different gender was no small feat, yet he managed it effortlessly. His gestures and manners were so impeccably noble that onlookers who occasionally showed interest would soon drift away after a few smiles and responses from him.

However, Ever knew from previous discussions that maintaining such a transformation became increasingly difficult over time. The longer this went on, the more taxing it would be for him.

'We need to find them soon.'

Pretending to tilt the parasol further over Pruelle's head to shield both their faces, Ever spoke.

"Are your feet hurting by any chance?"

Pruelle, who had been walking steadily, almost stumbled at the question.

"Why do you ask?"

"You're wearing high heels. It's fine for a short while, but walking for long must be challenging. If needed, I can carry you."

Though spoken indirectly, the concern in Ever's words was evident, worrying that Pruelle might be struggling in his transformed state.

Pruelle remained silent for quite some time before smiling and shaking his head. "It's a kind gesture, but I'm fine. I'm not that fragile."

Ever was about to insist that he speak up if he felt strained when Revlin's voice reached their ears.

-Do you hear me? I've found the Duke of Diarca. He seems to have come with his youngest son, Sir Kiolle da Diarca. Head north, towards the fenced Musk trees.-

Revlin's ability to transmit his voice only to specific individuals he chose had grown significantly since he'd broken free from his family's constraints. Now, even at great distances and under certain conditions, he could communicate his intentions.

Ever and Pruelle exchanged glances and, as if on cue, quickened their pace northward.

Revlin's voice continued, updating them with the evolving situation.

-The Duke of Diarca doesn't seem to be waiting for anyone else; he's just talking with Sir Kiolle.-

-Sir Kiolle looks bored... Oh. I think our eyes just met. Maybe he recognized me...-

-...No, it seems he didn't after all.-

-Hurry up! Baron Renbow, our target, has just appeared!-

Pruelle quickened his pace, but the limitations of his dress and heels were evident. Ever, noticing Pruella's near fall, reached out timely to catch the disguised noblewoman and lifted her up with ease.

Her ability to momentarily concentrate immense strength in her fingers could be slightly extended to other body parts, meaning she could easily carry a petite noblewoman and an even tinier kitten.

"Whoa...!"

"Sorry, but bear with me for a moment. It's better than getting hurt. Hold Nipollen tightly so he doesn't fall."

Pruelle, who had been flustered, soon calmed down. Ever was unaware of the blush spreading to his ears.

'There it is.'

They soon reached an area crowded with people. The most prominent figure was a stoic, noble-looking, raccoon-faced Elder – the face Ever had not forgotten since the unfortunate incident at the Cavalry's recent western mission celebration party. It was undoubtedly the Duke of Diarca.

Beside the Duke stood a young knight with a vexed expression, tall and handsome but with an equally disagreeable demeanor. Ever recognized him well – Sir Kiolle da Diarca, infamous in the Cavalry for being soundly defeated by Yuder in a past altercation.

Ever remembered him for another reason. Recently, Sir Kiolle had abruptly visited the Cavalry, demanding to meet Yuder Aile and causing quite a stir before leaving. When Ever and her colleagues reported the incident to Yuder, his response was memorable:

'Don't bother about that guy. Next time, just leave him be and let me know what he says.'

While the details of the past between Yuder and Sir Kiolle da Diarca were unknown, that reply had left a lasting impression.

Chapter 738

'Don't bother about that guy. Next time, just leave him be and let me know what he says.'

While the details of the past between Yuder and Sir Kiolle da Diarca were unknown, that reply had left a lasting impression.

Ever turned his gaze away from Kiolle. Among the nobles near Duke Diarca and Kiolle, only one stood out: their target, Baron Renbow.

Ever scanned the surroundings, searching for the Eldore siblings and Revlin, but the trio was nowhere to be seen. Then, a faint whisper, as if someone was right beside his ear, reached him.

-Deputy Commander. We are not there but on the opposite side, near the watermill.-

Following Revlin's voice, Ever's eyes were drawn to a small ornamental stream beside the walkway by the lake and a pretty watermill beside it. Behind it, three children peeked out, noticing Ever's gaze, and then quickly disappeared.

With a sense of relief, Ever spoke to Pruelle.

"They are over there by the watermill. Can you see them?"

"Ah... Yes. But, Miss Beck, could you perhaps put me down now...?"

Pruelle, still awkwardly held in Ever's arms, murmured with a strained smile. Only then did Ever realize she was still holding her and was startled.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I forgot to put you down. Were you uncomfortable?"

"Not at all. Well, not that I meant you should keep holding me, but now that you have put me down, it's fine. Yes, I'm quite alright."

Though Pruelle's usual ladylike demeanor slipped, fortunately, no one around them seemed to notice. Once on the ground, she took a few deep breaths and, feigning nonchalance, gestured to Ever.

"Let's sit on that bench over there. I'll pretend to feel dizzy, and you, Miss Beck, take out the parasol to shade us and pretend to wipe my face with a handkerchief to avoid attention."

"Yes."

They sat at a safe distance, keeping an eye on Duke Diarca's party.

'Baron Renbow keeps speaking to Duke Diarca, but the Duke's party doesn't seem too pleased. I heard Baron Renbow was part of the Duke's noble faction... Could this not be a pre-arranged situation?'

She wished she could hear their conversation more clearly when, timely, Revlin's voice reached her again.

-Deputy Commander. We can hear them better from our side. It seems like Duke Diarca's party wasn't expecting to encounter Baron Renbow here today. It could be an act from the Duke, but I don't think so.-

"Why?"

Ever murmured, not expecting Revlin to hear and reply, but to his surprise, the answer came from nearby.

"Because there are no other nobles around Duke Diarca and Sir Kiolle."

"I see, but what does that have to do with anything? Could it not be that they deliberately didn't bring attendants to meet secretly?"

"Hmm... Miss Beck. Duke Diarca doesn't need to take such precautions if he doesn't want to. If he had intended to meet Baron Renbow, he could have done so more comfortably elsewhere than in the outskirts of the Fourth Wall District. The fact that he came here with only one of his sons, who isn't even the eldest, and a minimal entourage, suggests that he might genuinely be here for personal

relaxation. If other nobles were around, it might be different, but that doesn't seem to be the case now."

"Mmm..."

In other words, in the eyes of the nobility, if there was an intention to meet someone away from prying eyes, this place and situation wouldn't have been chosen.

Baron Renbow continued to speak with a smile, but Duke Diarca's expression remained cold. He looked utterly bored and barely glanced at Renbow.

It seemed that Kiolle, the Duke's son, was more engaged in the conversation with Renbow, although not in a particularly friendly manner, but rather with a sense of caution.

'I'm curious about what they're discussing. If the sages' party is nearby as I expect, where could they be hiding?'

Continuing to wait for intermittent updates from Revlin's side didn't seem efficient. Ever pondered for a moment before coming to a decision.

'It's not bad to watch from a hidden spot without arousing suspicion, but it might be better to move around. Even if it's risky, we need a more detailed understanding of the enemies' movements.'

It was a decision to increase the risk level, but Ever, assessing her and her comrades' capabilities, thought it was a risk worth taking.

'Had it been the old me, I wouldn't have thought this way in such a situation. It's quite astonishing, really.'

Training with the Cavalry had made Ever realize she was more daring than she had thought. Initially overwhelmed by the responsibility as a Deputy Commander, she now found the burden somewhat enjoyable. It felt like discovering a hidden talent within herself.

'I remember wondering back when I first joined if I would ever face Kiolle of Diarca like Yuder did... Now, facing a great noble doesn't scare me at all.'

She smiled subtly and then spoke up.

"Elle, would it be possible for you to transform again?"

Pruelle closed his eyes as if gauging his condition, then nodded.

"Yes, I can. You want to get closer to Duke Diarca's side, right?"

"Yes. It's risky, but it seems like the best option."

"It's okay. I was thinking the same. You're asking because my ability is best suited for this, right? Just being acknowledged for that makes me feel really good."

Pruelle scanned the surroundings and then grinned, a playful smile that seemed slightly out of character for a lady.

"We'll need to move a bit. The lady will leave her escort behind for a while."

Ever and Pruelle rose from the bench and entered a secluded path, unnoticed by others. Pruelle stepped behind a large tree and reemerged seconds later, transformed into a robust knight, identical in appearance to those guarding Duke Diarca.

"I borrowed the appearance of one of Duke Diarca's knights who was controlling the area by the lake. He wasn't near the Duke at the time, so he's probably elsewhere now. It's hard to maintain the appearance of someone I've only seen once for long, but since knights move around and keep watch, getting close for a short time shouldn't arouse too much suspicion."

"Understood. If there's trouble, run right away. I'll watch and support you."

"That's reassuring. Then, could you please look after Nipollen for a moment?"

Ever gently took the small cat, Nipollen, handed over by Pruelle. Thankfully, due to their previous interactions, Nipollen didn't resist staying in Ever's embrace, even in such circumstances.

"I'll be back soon."

With a calm stride, Pruelle approached the area where Duke Diarca was. Ever watched her nervously.

As Pruelle neared Duke Diarca's entourage, a servant trailing behind addressed her. While their words were inaudible, it was apparent from their demeanor that they were inquiring about something. Ever worried if Pruelle's disguise had already been seen through.

'If that's the case...'

Ever was ready to dash out, snatch Pruelle, and use her strength if needed. However, after a short while, he saw Pruelle casually finish her conversation with the servant and smoothly integrate herself among them. She slowly relaxed her tense muscles as she saw Pruelle casually turn her head and smile subtly. It was indeed a display of remarkable courage.

Just then, Revlin's voice unexpectedly reached his ears, sounding puzzled by their abrupt change of position.

-Deputy Commander? Where did you suddenly go? You're not in any danger, are you?-

To respond to them, Ever would need to approach the area near the watermill. Holding Nipollen close, she moved carefully to avoid drawing any suspicion from those around.

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-Deputy Commander? Where did you suddenly go? You're not in any danger, are you?-

To respond to them, Ever would need to approach the area near the watermill. Holding Nipollen close, she moved carefully to avoid drawing any suspicion from those around.

Soon, three people rolling their eyes in confusion spotted Ever. Holding a cat, she paced like a guard waiting for her master and sent two short hand signals downwards.

The meaning was concise:

'No issues with the current situation.'

'Do not divert attention from the target and wait.'

Combined, these signals implied that the situation, with Ever present and Pruelle absent, was not a concern but intentional. Fortunately, the three astute individuals seemed to quickly grasp the meaning. Shortly after, Revlin responded.

-So, Brother Elle has transformed for the third time? Understood. I will wait.-

The boy, who had never affectionately addressed his own brothers as such, casually used this term of endearment for Pruelle, unrelated by blood.

Coming from similar backgrounds as nobles of ducal houses who turned their backs on their parents, it would have been more difficult for them not to grow close. However, the decisive factor in their camaraderie was Revlin being the reason Pruelle first decided to cooperate with the Cavalry.

Their relationship transcended mere friendship, viewing each other as newly found brothers, understanding each other's actions without words. Ever found this sight pleasing.

Meanwhile, Pruelle, transformed into a knight, was witnessing an inexplicable scene.

"Look here, Sir Kiolle. Do you not remember who I am? It's me, Baron Renbow, whom you met just a few days ago! Isn't it normal for me to greet the Duke when I see him passing by?"

"Why should I recognize who you are, Baron? We've already greeted each other; why do you keep insisting on talking to my father instead of me? Why did you keep beating around the bush?"

"When did I ever beat around the bush? I just have something personal to say to the Duke."

Baron Renbow. And Kiolle da Diarca.

The two had been engaged in an unending verbal skirmish, even before Pruelle approached as a knight.

The reason was simple. Baron Renbow, while strolling in Fourth Wall District, had encountered Duke Diarca and approached to greet him, asking to have a private word with him.

Under normal circumstances, the Duke would have either acquiesced to the request, moving Kiolle aside, or quickly ended the encounter by refusing.

However, before Duke Diarca could speak, Kiolle, suddenly suspicious, reacted sharply, turning the situation into an unexpectedly prolonged confrontation. This was what a weary and embarrassed servant, mistaking Pruelle for a knight who had come to intervene, explained.

"Ah, Sir Knight, no need to worry. It's just the youngest master's recent affliction flaring up again."

"Affliction?"

"The symptom where the master suspects everyone around him could be a beast."

"Ah..."

At first, it sounded absurd. But soon, it became clear that the servant's words were accurate.

For reasons unknown, Kiolle seemed to be extremely wary of Baron Renbow, who had approached unannounced and persistently sought an audience with the Duke even after formal greetings. Like a small dog protecting its master, Kiolle stepped in, preventing Duke Diarca from even speaking to Baron Renbow. It appeared as though he suspected any conversation between Duke Diarca and Baron Renbow could lead to an attack.

Despite knowing Kiolle's actions were motivated by concern for his father, his loud voice and childish demeanor did not come across as touching in the slightest.

And, in Pruelle's eyes, it seemed Duke Diarca shared the same sentiment.

"...Kiolle. I too find this situation unpleasant, but raising your voice like this in public is not becoming of your dignity," Duke Diarca chided with a click of his tongue. However, Kiolle, instead of heeding these words, became even more alarmed and turned to check on his father in a frenzy.

"What? Father, are you alright? You don't feel a headache or...any strange sensations?!"

"I've told you several times, I'm fine..."

"Father! Didn't you promise that you would not disregard my concerns for a while, appreciating my worry for you? How can you break your promise so soon? You said you would walk by the lake with only me today!"

"Kiolle, Kiolle... Do you realize how many days have passed since that 'for a while'? It's been several weeks already."

Several weeks would be more than enough time for anyone to consider the term 'for a while' to have been fulfilled. Yet, Kiolle shook his head firmly.

"Still, a promise is a promise! I find this situation extremely suspicious. What could be so urgent that it must be said to my father in my absence? If you won't answer, it surely must be some dishonorable affair, right? As a proud Diarca Imperial Knight, I will not stand idly by in such a crisis..."

"Wait a minute, a dishonorable affair? Such impudent and exaggerated accusations are intolerable!"

Baron Renbow, incredulous, raised his voice in protest. Pruelle fully understood his astonishment.

'The fact that he insists on speaking with Duke Diarca despite having already greeted him must mean, as His Majesty the Emperor speculated, that he's harboring the escaped sage. It seems Duke Diarca has been maintaining a careful distance from both the sage and Baron Renbow, ready to sever ties at any moment.'

If Duke Diarca had intended to protect the escaped sage, he would have found him by now. Baron Renbow and the sage might hope for Duke Diarca's power to shield them, but from the Duke's perspective, there's no reason to unconditionally protect someone who's caused trouble and is on the run. That's why Baron Renbow's approach was evident.

'Such a foolish move. For someone like Duke Diarca, the likelihood of entertaining such sudden requests is extremely low...'

Raised by a gambling-addicted, arrogant, and overbearing Duke who considered everyone, including family, beneath him, Pruelle had become adept at predicting the thoughts of such high nobility.

The leaders of the four great ducal houses were not just heads of their families. They stood atop a colossal noble force that had maintained its position for a millennium. They were individuals who had lived without concern for others' opinions or fear of exposing their weaknesses.

Duke Diarca, who had delivered the final blow to the weakened imperial authority over a long period by snatching the position of the Crown Prince, securing his place as the victor of the next era, would not be short of arrogance - if anything, his pride would only be greater.

'I had felt it even when I saw him at the last party. Though he seems to hide it well in public, the attitude he revealed when provoked by Yuder seemed no less than that of my father.'

However, Pruelle found it somewhat surprising that such a man was tolerating, albeit with an annoyed expression, the stubbornness of his youngest son. It was said that Duke Diarca, despite finding his youngest son's lack of talent pitiable as he grew older, still found him endearing enough to arrange a position for him in the Imperial Knight.

"So what is it then? Why bother coming all the way here under the pretense of a greeting? What exactly are you trying to say?"

"Why should I explain that to Sir Kiolle? Ah, of course, I am truly sorry for interrupting your precious father-son time, but..."

"If you don't speak, I will suspect your intentions and challenge you to a duel."

"A duel? Sir Kiolle? Really, why are you acting like this? Didn't you see me at His Highness the Crown Prince's palace before! I really don't understand why you doubt my intentions so much!"

"That's exactly why I find it more suspicious! Ugh!"

Kiolle finally removed his glove and threw it down.

"Young master...!"

The servants guarding the surroundings all tightly shut their eyes. Duke Diarca also held his head.

"Kiolle. Do you really have to persist in this..."

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"Kiolle. Do you really have to persist in this..."

"Sir Kiolle, what is the meaning of this...! How can a knight of the Imperial Knight Palace Guard dare challenge me, someone who is not a knight, to a duel!"

"Is that so? Then hurry up and tell me. For someone so close to those who ran away from the Bright Palace and never returned, what is your true intention for appearing at such a time?"

"I have been saying there's no hidden intention whatsoever!"

Baron Renbow's outcry, a mix of incredulity, fear, and indescribable emotions, was met with a growling Kiolle, who turned his head and pointed at a servant standing beside Pruelle.

"You there! Where is the sword I entrusted to you earlier? Bring it to me at once! I shall protect my father from this liar!"

"My lord. The eyes of the public are upon us. Please calm yourself! You surely do not intend to actually propose a duel? I cannot bring you the sword!"

"There's no law for this in the world. It's an overreaction to just ask for a conversation with Duke Diarca, don't you think!"

The scene was one of unparalleled chaos.

However, Pruelle, observing everything with a cool detachment, thought differently from the rest.

'It seems that Kiolle Diarca's intention is less about dueling and more about provoking Baron Renbow to gauge his reaction.'

If one truly intended to duel, they would not cause such a scene; rather, they would simply bring two weapons, declare a duel 'under the eyes of god and the sword,' and seek agreement.

Noble duels usually involve three witnesses for fairness, and if one were serious, they could easily request any passing noble to oblige. However, after declaring his intent to duel, Kiolle only caused a ruckus, never taking the necessary steps for an actual duel.

The difference between merely threatening an action and actually carrying it out was evident.

Pruelle couldn't help but think Kiolle was well aware of this distinction and was deliberately causing this commotion.

'I thought he was just recklessly causing trouble, but perhaps not.'

Until now, Pruelle had judged Kiolle as 'the youngest of the Diarca family, inept and arrogantly indulging in knightly fantasies,' as per the public rumors. Yet, there are others like Duke Peletta Kishiar La Orr, who, despite being more harshly judged than Kiolle, are in fact, meticulous and patient, adept at concealing their strength.

'The mention of the Bright Palace earlier was also suspicious. Kiolle, even as the Crown Prince's guard, seemed hostile towards the sage's party from the beginning. Hmm. If he's come to such a conclusion independently, not swayed by his family, that's impressive. And contrary to rumors, he isn't as brash in speech.'

Having met Kishiar first and shattering his prejudices, Pruelle mistakenly thought he couldn't take Kiolle lightly. Not knowing why Kiolle couldn't clearly propose a duel or properly insult his opponent, it was an unavoidable judgment.

Then, Kiolle raised his voice again.

"Very well. Let me be more direct! Baron Renbow!"

As Baron Renbow flinched in surprise, Kiolle boldly continued.

"Baron Renbow, do you have any idea how many times I have seen you and the ignorant commoners of the Bright Palace conspiring together?"

"What, what?"

"I know that you, Baron Renbow behaved as if you were a subordinate to those commoners, repeatedly leaving and returning from the outside to aid them! I have counted the number of times you sneaked into the palace to meet someone without even seeing His Highness the Crown Prince, which is six times! Even after those people disappeared, didn't you come to the palace once, cunningly choosing a time when I was not on duty?"

"What are you saying right now! When have I ever..."

"Isn't it deliberate that you encountered us as we wandered alone without even a servant? Did you not inquire when my father would be alone at the estate?"

Such an outburst could only be described as the height of paranoia.

However, Baron Renbow was genuinely startled by these words. He was so taken aback that, unlike before, he couldn't protest vehemently, his eyes wide as a rabbit's, quickly glancing around as if searching for someone.

Although brief, Pruelle, who had been closely observing, clearly saw this reaction. Even Duke Diarca, who had been distressed by his son's commotion, suddenly narrowed his eyes and twisted his thin lips. His gaze turned into that of a predator intently observing Baron Renbow.

"...Hmm."

Ironically, the only one who failed to notice Baron Renbow's reaction amidst this situation was Kiolle, who was heatedly involved in the moment.

"Even in this situation, do you claim to be innocent? I, Kiolle Diarca, have personally observed these events! If you dare say I am wrong, then speak up! Deny that you have betrayed your loyalty and become a subordinate to the commoners!"

Kiolle shouted, puffing out his chest with passion, sweat beading on his forehead from the intensity.

Baron Renbow, without blinking, stammered and gasped for breath. The people thought he was so shocked by Kiolle's tremendous insult that he had lost his ability to speak.

However, his reaction was slightly different from everyone's expectations.

Baron Renbow, who had been repeatedly opening and closing his mouth as if to say something, suddenly clutched his hair and twisted violently.

"Ch-choking!"

"Baron Renbow?!"

Duke Diarca's servant shouted in panic. But Baron Renbow, beyond comprehension, doubled over and collapsed to the ground.

"Baron Renbow has collapsed!"

"Don't panic! It might be an act! Confirm thoroughly!"

Kiolle, more panicked than anyone, stuttered unattractively. Pruelle quietly blended in with the servants and approached the fallen Baron Renbow. He was convulsing in pain, repeatedly muttering like a broken object.

"I, I must... the sage... the sage asked me to..."

"What? What are you saying? Come to your senses, Lord!"

As the servants shook him, Baron Renbow's eyes fluttered open. He desperately appealed to Duke Diarca, who was looking down from a distance. His fixed, unblinking eyes sent a chill through everyone.

"Th-the sage... meet the sage, please, Your Grace. He... he desperately needs your help... I was only for Your Grace... no, His Highness the Crown Prince... no..."

"Look, look at these strange words and behavior! Baron Renbow's condition is not normal! Didn't I say something was suspicious!"

As Kiolle spoke hesitantly yet loudly, the servants could not help but acknowledge that the youngest lord's suspicions were not entirely unfounded. They exchanged glances, realizing something was truly amiss with Baron Renbow. Even as he convulsed, his neck and eyes, which remained fixed on Duke Diarca, did not move, an eerie sight as if he were under some curse.

Pruelle, having been briefed before the mission about the sage and his party's abilities, reached a different conclusion.

‘The sage was said to be a brainwashing expert. Is this the effect of brainwashing?’

Just moments ago, Baron Renbow, who had seemed perfectly ordinary, had suddenly collapsed in a state of confusion. While it was unclear why he had exhibited such a reaction, it seemed evident that he was under some form of mind control, and the power exerted on him had abruptly triggered a change.

Duke Diarca, who had been observing Baron Renbow calmly and quietly, finally spoke.

"How strange, Baron Renbow. When I first met you, you did not seem like someone lacking in manners. I had always respected your cautious and careful nature... What could have caused such a change in you?"

"No, no... I, I, I am... Ughh!"

It was then that a sudden commotion erupted not far away.

A loud crashing sound, as if a tree were being felled, followed by a sharp scream, pierced the air.

"Ah!"

Everyone reflexively turned their heads toward the sound.

A woman, waving her gloved hand threateningly, was attacking someone who was rolling to avoid her.

While others might not have recognized her, Pruelle immediately knew who she was.

'Deputy Commander Ever...!'