

Turning 741

Chapter 741

In the midst of tension, an unexpected event occurred to Ever as she watched over Pruelle. It was just before Baron Renbow began showing unusual phenomena.

"Huh? Nipollen? What's wrong?"

Nipollen, who had been quietly nestled in Ever's arms, suddenly perked up his ears and lifted his head. He repeatedly narrowed and then dilated his pupils as he stared intently at something, his small nose pointing upwards. Finally, he opened his mouth and let out a soft cry.

It was unusual for Nipollen to speak unless prompted by his brother. Concerned he might be in pain, Ever was genuinely startled.

"Nipollen? Oh no...!"

Just as Ever was about to comfort the little cat, Nipollen fluidly slipped out of her embrace and leaped away, evading Ever's grasp with unexpected speed.

'Oh dear!'

This was an emergency. With Pruelle unable to come to their aid, Ever hadn't expected such a situation. She heard a whooshing sound and felt a gust of wind as she chased after the fleeing cat.

"Ever! What's going on?"

Appearing with the wind was Hinn Eldore. Utilizing the ability of the siblings to teleport others when at least one of them was present, Finn had sent Hinn.

Ever quickly surveyed her surroundings. The few people around were all distracted by the exciting chaos caused by Kiolle Da Diarca, paying no attention to anything else. No one noticed Hinn's sudden appearance beside Ever, given his small stature.

Ever hastily explained the situation.

"Nipollen suddenly ran away! We must find him."

"Nipollen? Did he flee out of fear, or was it something else?"

Hinn asked, keeping pace with Ever without losing her breath.

"It didn't seem like fear! He just suddenly took off after looking somewhere."

"How odd. Did he spot someone familiar, perhaps?"

"I wish that were the case... Ah, he seemed to go that way, but where did he go?"

It was difficult to track the small kitten, especially as he blended into the underbrush. Just when Ever was about to pause in confusion, a tree's shadow among them suddenly undulated and morphed into a human shape.

The shadow, without rising, pointed in a direction. Hinn exclaimed with joy.

"It's Gakane's shadow clone!"

"Over there, let's go!"

Grateful for Gakane's timely assistance, Ever hurried in the direction the shadow indicated. Nipollen was not far, near a secluded, shadowy spot by the lake.

"Nipollen!"

Ever was about to embrace the cat in relief but then hesitated.

Nipollen sat in front of a large tree, as if facing an impassable door, looking at something. What could he be staring at in the seemingly empty space?

Nipollen turned to Ever, flicking his tail. Ever watched, feeling a strange sense of foreboding.

‘This... feels...’

"We've come a bit off track, but we're not far from where we were, right? Look, there's Diarca acting foolish over there. Anyway, now that we've found Nipollen, we should head back!"

"Just a moment, Hinn."

"Yes?"

"Do you remember Nipollen's second power?"

"The one besides transforming? Of course, I remember."

Nipollen, who could transform into a cat from his childhood, had more abilities than just this transformation. This young boy also possessed another ability: he could discern Awakener from non-Awakener with uncanny accuracy.

This second ability usually didn't stand out much in the Cavalry, where most were Awakeners. However, it became quite noticeable when non-Awakener guests or mages visited.

Like all Awakeners, Nipollen's abilities had evolved slightly during his time with the Cavalry. Ever recalled a conversation with Pruelle, who had recently spoken of his younger sibling with great delight.

"Nippy's abilities seem to extend beyond just distinguishing between the Awakeners and non-Awakeners and feeling comfortable around the Awakeners. Lately, it appears he can even detect invisible powers. Isn't that remarkable?"

Ever had heard that Nipollen had once suddenly disappeared, only to be found observing Kanna, who was using her powers in a room.

The extent of Nipollen's perception wasn't fully understood, as communicating with him was difficult, but Pruelle saw this as a positive development.

‘He's always been sensitive since he was young. If he becomes more attuned to sensory perception, maybe he could be more comfortable even when not in his cat form...’

Ever gazed thoughtfully at Nipollen and asked,

"Nipollen. Is there something there?"

"...Ever. Do you think Nipollen came here because of his second power?"

"I'm not sure. But I heard something from Elle recently."

"Hmm..."

At this, Hinn's expression subtly changed.

After a moment, Nipollen, who had been slowly moving his tail, turned to Ever and opened his mouth, emitting a squeak more than a meow.

As Nipollen suddenly stood up on his hind legs and scraped at the ground, Ever reached out, and Hinn's fist, which had swiftly grown, surged toward the large tree in front of the cat.

Had there been nothing there, it would have been a simple strike shattering a tree.

But just before the attack landed, Ever felt a strange sensation, as if the area around the tree was trembling.

Thud...!

"Damn it. How could this...!"

From the air that felt solid as a thick wall breaking, someone who had been invisible until that moment appeared, looking astonished.

Three people stood protectively, with a middle-aged man in a pilgrim's robe standing behind them.

'...Found it. This was the place.'

Pruelle's words were proven true. What they had failed to find all this time, the small Nipollen had easily discovered. Communication might be difficult, but his place as a member of the Cavalry was undeniable.

Seeing Nipollen, who had just evaded the attack and fled to a nearby tree, Ever smiled, feeling a thrilling and wild sensation surge within.

"You must be the Sage and his companions, right? We've been looking for you. I'm pleased to finally meet you."

"Could it be... the Cavalry?"

"Yes. Last time you managed to elude our members, but not today. We're aware of your crimes and the circumstances. Please come with us peacefully."

"Sage! We must escape!"

Of course, Ever didn't expect them to come along quietly. After a rough shout, a member of the Star of Nagran swung a dagger at her with great force. An unknown power emanated from the dagger, swiftly enveloping both the man and Ever, forming a semicircular space.

Ever dodged the man's attack and tried to break through the semicircular space, but it felt as if she were trapped behind a solid wall. Like the invisible shield that had been around the tree, it seemed that this man's ability was to create a space that could trap and conceal something.

"This is a bit troublesome."

"Just trapped one, now escape while you can! I'll handle this woman! There's only a little kid left anyway...!"

The man, who was shouting fervently, suddenly stopped mid-sentence as he saw something growing rapidly not far away.

"Uh-huh~ Just a little kid, right. But I'm not just any kid, what now?"

Hinn, with everything but his face grotesquely swollen, laughed gleefully. His eyes, like those of a predator, looked down upon the Awakeners of the Star of Nagran.

Stunned by this bizarre and unbelievable sight, they blinked dumbly, then screamed in terror.

Seizing the moment, Ever commanded Hinn.

"Hinn! Take care of them while I break out of here!"

"Okay!"

Ever focused her energy into her fingertips, assuming a ready stance. The power that enveloped her gloves, like a thin shield, was ideal for piercing, as hard as solid metal.

Anyone who underestimated her as just a woman would be swiftly subdued by the fearsome power at her fingertips, unable to mount a proper defense.

'I wasn't appointed Deputy Commander for nothing.'

Even among the Awakeners, one shouldn't judge by appearances alone, a fact they should have well known. Encountering such a fool who still made such judgments ignited her fighting spirit.

With a cold smile, Ever took a heavy step forward and then extended her hand. The man, reflexively swinging his dagger to block, watched his blade crack soundlessly upon impact and then saw Ever's slender finger approaching his face.

"What the...!"

Before he could finish his sentence, a tremendous explosion rang out. The sound, created by the collision of their bodies, was unbelievably loud for such an encounter.

It took Ever just a few minutes to break through the wall and emerge.

Chapter 742

‘Until this moment, everything had been proceeding smoothly,’ Yuder mused, his eyes lowered as he read about Ever's quick and appropriate decision to subdue the Star of Nagran.

Ever's opponent, an Awakener with the ability to create invisible spaces, used this power for both protection and imprisonment. It seemed beyond doubt that this same individual had played a key role in isolating the disturbance at the Sun Palace from the outside world during the intrusion.

Despite adeptly wielding his power, the enemy had a weakness. If the user himself was attacked and rendered combat-incapable, the space he created became unsustainable.

Ever, understanding this flaw perfectly, had effectively thrashed her adversary. She was the best in the Cavalry with the ability to control her power so precisely that she was able to attack just enough to destroy weapons but not destroy the human body.

While Ever was dealing with him, Hinn was not idle. She single-handedly held her own against three others and nearly captured the sage just as Ever was emerging.

The hindrance to both Ever and Hinn was the seemingly weak sage, who alone appeared incapable of striking down a single person.

Yuder swiftly skimmed the following passage:

"Just before I emerge, the sage fled towards the Duke of Diarca with only one Awakener. Although we attempted to follow, those we thought we had subdued rose again, ignoring their injuries and relentlessly pursuing us. Even after being struck down repeatedly, they disregarded their own bodies and charged madly."

The Awakeners guarding the sage, despite broken bones and regaining consciousness from unconsciousness, relentlessly charged at Ever and Hinn. The letter suggested that their insensitivity to pain only added to their surprise.

The enemies, screaming in excruciating pain with each defeat, yet rising again to engage in a frenzied attack. The situation was vividly portrayed in the letter.

"Brainwashing truly creates troublesome foes," murmured Kishiar, gazing in the same direction as Yuder. Yuder nodded slightly and spoke.

"It would have been easier to subdue mindless enemies. But in a situation where the priority is to overpower without killing, fighting such adversaries is challenging, even for the more experienced."

"Indeed. What would my assistant have done in that situation?"

"If I were there..." Yuder pondered his response.

"I would have immediately sealed the area to prevent them from escaping their shield as soon as Nipollen located the enemy."

If they had created an invisible space for protection, Yuder would have countered with a greater force, sealing the outside to block any escape route. This method, only possible with Yuder's incomparably great and overwhelming power, was also the quickest.

Kishiar laughed silently at Yuder's response.

"A tactic of advancing the general's badge to its limit for encirclement and capture. Truly my assistant's approach."

This was a metaphor drawn from a strategy game they had played together.

Though Yuder wasn't there with his comrades at that time, they had once again found a way to overcome the situation. It was Gakane who had appeared just in time to assist Ever and Hinn, caught in a tight spot.

"Gakane!"

"Sorry, Ever. I intended to help covertly as instructed, but it seemed unnecessary in this situation. Let Hinn and me handle this. Go after the sage!"

Thanks to Gakane, Ever could leave the battle against the brainwashed Awakeners to him and Hinn, and pursue the sage.

However, this time, the last one by the sage's side hindered Ever. A diminutive man with a timid appearance and a long scar on one ear, he was a Diemon capable of duplicating others' abilities in a degraded form.

—

‘Why doesn't this forest seem to end? It's near the Duke of Diarca's spot, isn't it? It feels too long, even considering my pace...!’

Ever slowed down, scanning the surroundings sharply.

‘No people in sight. No traces either. That means... a mental power?’

Ever recalled that she had once made eye contact with the man who fled with the sage. He had sunburnt skin and a torn scar on one ear. It was since that encounter that she had lost sight of them, and the path seemed to repeat itself.

‘If this is a mental power, running blindly is futile. I must break out from within.’

Ever coolly recalled the mental power counter-training from the Cavalry. The most effective method in such a scenario was to find a weak spot from inside and break through.

But where to break through? The surroundings looked no different from an ordinary lakeside walk, making it hard to pinpoint.

As Ever cautiously surveyed the area, a rustling sound startled him, and she turned, fists clenched.

"...Nipollen?!"

But it wasn't an enemy that appeared, rather a small cat. Ever's heart settled as she saw Nipollen jump down from a branch.

‘Lucky I didn't attack first.’

Ever wasn't sure why Nipollen was here, but she might be better at finding a way out of this situation.

"Nipollen, do you know the way out of here?"

The cat just stood there, making it unclear whether it understood or not. Ever changed her approach.

"Elle... Hmm. Shall we go back to see your brother?"

At that, the kitten meowed softly and started running in a certain direction. Ever followed without hesitation.

As they ran, the scenery began to warp, revealing a distorted gap between the trees, like a misaligned puzzle. Without hesitation, Ever gathered strength in her hand and lunged towards it.

Feeling something catch in her hand, she pulled back and struck again. The world crumbled with a thud, and it seemed like the trees were breaking.

On the third strike, she saw a blurry shadow, resembling a person fleeing from her. Instinctively, Ever knew it was her target and continued her assault.

Boom, thud. The sound of the world breaking grew until finally reaching its limit.

Thud!

Everything shattered, and the world around Ever changed color in an instant. She closed and opened her eyes, feeling the fragments of an unknown illusion flow chaotically.

"Aaargh!"

With someone's tearing scream, Ever finally escaped back to reality.

The first thing she saw was the shattered tree brushed by her hand, and the man who had locked eyes with Ever earlier. The man, bleeding from the mouth, writhed in pain and quickly averted his gaze upon seeing Ever.

Ever caught the man's murmuring as he wiped away the blood.

"As expected, that Nahan's ability, isn't strong at all... If it weren't for the sage's command, I would've maintained my previous power instead of using this weak one... Ah, what a waste... Such a waste..."

'Nahan? Did he just say he used Nahan's power?'

Ever, having heard from Kanna about the abilities of those who remained with the sage, easily deduced the man's power.

'It was said that there is one who could mimic others' abilities in a degraded form. So, he copied Nahan's power to create a repeating illusionary path, buying time for the sage to escape...!'

It was strange that the illusion, indistinguishable from reality, was broken so easily. If he had been the real Nahan, it wouldn't have ended so simply.

Realizing the sage was not with the man, Ever bit her lip and turned his head. During the illusion, she had unwittingly reached near the lakeside where the Duke of Diarca's people were.

Everyone was looking at Ever and the man sprawling in front of her with surprise. Among them, Ever noticed an unfamiliar knight looking at her with the most shocked and worried expression.

'Luckily, Pruelle hasn't been discovered yet. Not much time has passed.'

However, the plan to capture the sage's party without revealing themselves had collapsed. As Ever felt a faint sense of disappointment, someone emerged from the opposite bushes and prostrated before the Duke of Diarca.

"I, Ajihen Toom, humbly present myself before His Highness the Duke of Diarca."

He was the sage, revealing his face after removing the pilgrim's robe.

Chapter 743

"I, Ajihen Toom, humbly present myself before His Highness the Duke of Diarca."

He was the sage, revealing his face after removing the pilgrim's robe.

There was a prolonged silence as everyone was rendered speechless, each astonished for various reasons.

The situation was tense, especially since the sage had now directly approached Duke Diarca. Unable to move immediately, Ever and Pruelle, along with the other hidden members near the waterwheel, exchanged brief, intense glances.

The sage, with a respectful yet detached tone, broke the silence. "Your Grace, I apologize for disturbing your rest. Although these circumstances are alarming, I swear by the god who oversees only the truth, the events of today are neither the fault of this man nor the pitiable citizens of our empire. Your merciful Grace, may I request your ear for our story?"

"Woah, they said he is a master of brainwashing, but his tongue is truly something else. Could probably tie a ribbon or even skip rope with it!" Finn, hiding behind the waterwheel, couldn't hide his incredulous amusement. Revlin, similarly amused, tried to suppress his laughter upon hearing Finn's comment.

Unaware of the boys' exchange, the sage remained kneeling, awaiting Duke Diarca's response. Onlookers alternated their gaze between the sage, who bore a kind and truthful demeanor, and Ever, who had just made a dramatic entrance by happily smashing people and trees alike.

"What on earth is going on?"

“How can a woman wave her hand and shatter a tree? This is terrifying. She must be no ordinary person. Definitely an Awakener!”

“An Awakener in the capital... Could it be the Cavalry?”

Ever, out of uniform, became the subject of the crowd's speculation. They debated whether she belonged to the Cavalry or not, arguing that if she did, the Cavalry should be held responsible for the violence and destruction in the Fourth Wall District.

Duke Diarca, in his own way, silently observed the scene from behind Kiolle. The shrewd Duke's thoughts were inscrutable to everyone, even the quick-witted Pruelle.

Seeing the hostile and wary gazes directed at Ever, Pruelle clenched his fists. Regardless of what anyone said, Ever maintained a stoic expression, but it was hard for Pruelle to do the same.

Even when his father had announced he would do something despicable, he could laugh it off, but now he was too angry and upset to maintain his transformed state.

Deciding it was best to retreat and return to his original form, he carefully began to move away. However, before Pruelle could move, someone stepped forward, and a roar of furious outburst followed.

"How dare you spout such nonsense!"

"...Huh?"

"What?"

"...Yes?"

The one who had shouted and clenched his fist was none other than Kiolle da Diarca.

The murmuring nobles were stunned, gaping at him in disbelief. The nearby Knights were equally shocked.

"What's this? Has he finally lost his mind?"

Finn squinted his eyes and circled his temple with his finger, implying insanity. Revlin's wide-eyed, bewildered expression mirrored the sentiment.

The sage, too, seemed startled and rarely blinked his eyes several times before reopening his mouth.

"...Sir Diarca? Whom, perchance, are you referring to..."

"Shut up, you cunning wretch! How dare you call my name without knowing me well! Do you expect me to just watch you spouting nonsense and disrupting the atmosphere as soon as you arrive!"

"I am not, Sir Diarca but rather to His Grace, Duke Diarca..."

Before the sage could finish his sentence, Kiolle mercilessly cut him off.

"Quiet! I forbade you to speak my father's and my name with that mouth!"

Kiolle stomped his feet in a fit of rage, almost as if trying to prevent the sage's words from reaching his father in a mischievous manner.

"No. I, Di..."

"Father! It seems today is not a day for rest. Why bother with these strange individuals who keep appearing? Let's return!"

"Di..."

"Aaargh!"

What exactly was Kiolle da Diarca trying to do? His behavior seemed maddeningly suspicious, but on the other hand, the earlier peculiar behavior of Baron Renbow made it difficult to dismiss Kiolle's actions as merely bizarre.

Did Kiolle know something about this situation? People were extremely confused.

It became clear that Kiolle wasn't shouting at the surrounding nobles, but they, gripped by unease, closed their mouths and just rolled their eyes quietly. Thanks to Kiolle's ability to attract attention, Pruelle also quietly retreated and returned to his original form.

'Kiolle da Diarca... truly an unpredictable character. I'm not sure what he intends, but perhaps he is similar to me or Revlin. I mustn't judge people solely by rumors in the future.'

As Duke Diaca was about to speak, Kiolle continued to angrily admonish the sage, telling him not to dare look up with those cunning eyes, or to shut his mouth.

"...Kiolle. What are you doing? In a situation where strange things are happening, if someone comes forward to speak about it, shouldn't we at least listen? Especially since the Deputy Commander of the Cavalry, not in uniform, was seen harming someone in broad daylight."

Duke Diarca's thinly veiled gaze swept over Ever's face. He remembered Ever's face from a party they had attended recently.

It was Ever who was exposed, but it was Kiolle who turned pale at the mention of the Cavalry. He tried to persuade his father in a very loud voice.

"Father. I don't know who that woman is, but I think he's more suspicious than Baron Renbow! I'm convinced that you will be in danger if you converse with him! So please don't go near or talk to him! Ah, perhaps your condition is already..."

"Kiolle."

With just his name, the Duke quieted his son and then squinted his eyes while looking at Kiolle's pestering face.

"You seem to have discovered something while observing Baron Renbow. Is that right?"

Kiollle's eyes twitched for a moment. His arrogant face appeared to others as if hiding a deep scheme, but in reality, no one there correctly sensed that this was not the case.

"Are you causing a commotion because this is something you cannot discuss here?"

"That... That is."

"Duke Diarca, Your Grace, what a place to meet you."

At the moment Kiollle barely managed to open his mouth, a soft voice cut through the air, drawing everyone's attention. The people turned to see a face that had been the talk of the town for the past few months.

"That's definitely Revlin Shand Apeto, the third son of Apeto who joined the Cavalry..."

"And the red-haired one standing in front? Where have I seen that face before...? Who was it?"

Duke Diarca's gaze, however, was not on Revlin but on the young man with red hair standing at the front.

"Seeing the first son of Tain here is quite a surprise."

"Ha ha, yes. Now that I'm a full-fledged member of the Cavalry, there's no place I shouldn't be."

With those words, people realized that the youth before them was indeed the first son of Tain, a figure who had scarcely shown his face in social circles.

Unlike Revlin, Pruelle's face was not well-known to the people, and that remained true even now, during the ongoing trial of his father, Duke Tain. While Revlin had become a temporary member of the Cavalry amidst a noisy scandal, Pruelle had joined more quietly, seeking to protect Nipollen and to live away from the shadow of his family's name.

Although his identity became somewhat known when he attended a party at the palace recently with his sister, there were still not many who could recognize his face at a glance.

'Perhaps that will change after today.'

Pruelle didn't mind it. Despite having an ordinary appearance compared to the doll-like beauty of Revlin, his unignorable gaze and smile as he spoke betrayed his distinctive presence.

"I recently visited the Tain family's villa in Fourth Wall District with my fellow Cavalry members, including the Deputy Commander, and would you believe it, the very criminals who caused the recent explosion in the capital appeared here? As these are individuals we must capture to ensure the safety of the capital, we've come all the way here. If it's alright, may we take that person kneeling over there into our custody?"

Despite being in the same Cavalry, the background of being a scion of one of the four great duke families held significant power in such places. Pruelle felt this effect more acutely and overwhelmingly now than ever before.

Chapter 744

The nobles, having heard Pruelle's words, suddenly became aware of the identity of the man Ever had knocked down, in addition to the kneeling sage in front of Duke Diarca.

"Those men... were they the culprits behind the recent explosion incident?"

The man still trampled under Ever's feet, Diemon, with his dusky, southern mixed-race complexion and unappealing features, could be considered as such. However, the well-cultured and warm-looking sage did not seem the type to cause such accidents. Moreover, wasn't this sage associated with Baron Renbow, a nobleman?

Yet Pruelle, who nearly became a Duke, did not seem to be lying. More precisely, his status lent an immediate credibility to his words.

As the expressions of those who valued appearances and status over truth began to shift, Duke Diarca spoke up.

"Why ask me about taking them away?"

"I thought all the culprits here, including Baron Renbow, who lies unconscious, came to see Your Grace, Duke Diarca. Since you seemed to be in conversation, I thought it proper to ask for permission. If I have overstepped, I apologize."

"I was merely walking with my son; I had no appointments with anyone. Why Baron Renbow and this man blocked our path, I am also unaware."

"What an insolent act by them. It must have been unpleasant for you. So, Your Grace, you met this man for the first time today?"

Pruelle's naive question was met with Duke Diarca's brief silence. He narrowed his eyes at Pruelle while stroking his beard, not even glancing at the kneeling sage before responding.

"Let's see... I meet so many people that I don't remember when I first met each one. Do you think I should recognize everyone who wishes to meet me?"

Suddenly, the sage's shoulders tensed. He cautiously called out to Duke Diarca.

"Duke Diarca Your... "

"Who is interrupting me? I did not give permission to speak."

Before Kiolle could shout to silence him, Duke Diarca cut him off with a chilling voice that instilled fear even without raising his voice. The sage's complexion changed at the sound.

Duke Diarca, more effectively and quickly than Kiolle's uproar, silenced the sage and then spoke nonchalantly to Pruelle.

"I dislike prolonged disturbances. Speak your mind, if you have something to say."

"Understood. I realize Your Grace must be busy. However, something does seem odd."

"What might that be?"

After a quick glance at the frozen sage, Pruelle smiled slightly and replied.

"According to our investigation while pursuing the culprits, these men entered the Imperial Palace several times as healers with permissions to the Bright Palace... Isn't it strange, Your Grace, that you do not recall them?"

"..."

"Ah, and I have already confirmed through entrance records that Baron Durmand and Baron Renbow vouched for their identities, so you need not doubt that fact."

Ever, unfamiliar with the underlying tensions in the nobles' words, had simply recorded the conversation as she heard it. However, for Yuder and Kishiar, who were reading it, the dangerous undertones of that moment were crystal clear.

To summarize, Pruelle first circumspectly inquired if Duke Diarca had any connection to the perpetrators of the explosion incident. Duke Diarca casually denied any relation to the sage, intending to dismiss the matter. Pruelle then immediately pointed out the contradiction and falsehood in Duke Diarca's response by revealing the sage's identity.

Duke Diarca's side, believing the Cavalry would be unaware of the sage's identity, must have been quite surprised. Pruelle's clever maneuvering, based on his keen understanding of Duke Diarca's tendency to give vague answers and pretend disassociation, was truly remarkable.

However, Duke Diarca, cunning as an old raccoon, did not show any sign of discomfiture at this single attack.

Unperturbed by the murmuring of the nobles shocked by the revelation that the culprits of the capital's explosion were actually the Crown Prince's healers, Duke Diarca replied with a calm demeanor.

"I said I do not remember everyone, not that I didn't know. Now that you mention it, I recall Baron Durmand expressing concern that the Crown Prince seemed a bit weakened after an injury, and out of loyal devotion, wanted to send skilled healers. However, being a man of faith, how could I have been pleased with that? Though I granted them entry, it was against my will. The last I heard was that Baron Durmand, having recently retired to the countryside, passed this matter to Baron Renbow, with whom he had a close relationship."

After saying this, Duke Diarca looked down at the still unconscious Baron Renbow with a feigned expression of concern.

"To think that ordinary healers are actually Awakeners, and nearly caused a disturbance in the capital's security... It would be truly regrettable if true."

Indeed, Duke Diarca had not definitively denied seeing the sage when asked. He had arrogantly countered whether he needed to remember every person he met.

Everyone knew it was improbable that Duke Diarca would ignore someone as significant as a healer frequenting the Crown Prince's palace. However, what mattered was that his explanation did not directly contradict itself. The nobles, in the face of Duke Diarca's calm denial, collectively remained silent.

"Understood. Then it's alright if we take these individuals away?"

"That's why I asked why you're asking me in the first place. If they are indeed the culprits, then just take them. I heard the Cavalry was fortunately nearby when the explosion happened and managed to conclude it without harm, but it seems they let the culprits casually walk around the capital. I understand your concern that this might come to light... But your Commander is Duke Peletta, not Diarca, haha."

Duke Diarca spoke with a tone that seemed to jest, yet wielded words like a hidden blade.

He subtly emphasized the 'fortunate' presence of the Cavalry near the incident, making others suspiciously question that coincidence. Instead of directly denying his connection with the sage, he shifted the focus onto Kishiar and Pruelle. With his smooth rhetoric, he made them the butt of the joke. Pruelle, even he, was lost for words at his natural deflection.

'Sly as they say... The nickname 'old raccoon' isn't for naught. But let's not get entangled. As long as he has denied the connection with the sage, taking him away fulfills our objective.'

Upon the revelation that the sage had been in the Crown Prince's palace as a healer, Pruelle had expected that Duke Diarca would concoct some reason to prevent them from taking the sage away, especially to conceal any deeper connections. However, judging by Duke Diarca's words, it seemed he was content to feign ignorance and allow them to take the sage.

'There must be one reason for this. He's confident that whatever the Cavalry's investigation reveals about the sage, he can deny any involvement.'

Indeed, Duke Diarca had already demonstrated his skill at evading responsibility right before their eyes. Even if incontrovertible evidence of collusion were presented, the old raccoon would surely laugh it off, pushing others forward while he retreated into the background.

Just as he had callously abandoned Baron Durmand after gifting poisoned wine to Yuder at the previous party.

Pruelle was well aware that such an attitude from someone who undoubtedly knew he had guessed the truth was nothing less than a complete disregard for the Cavalry, neither more nor less.

Could there be a clearer demonstration that he did not consider the Cavalry a worthy adversary?

Pruelle, struggling to contain his rising anger, managed a smooth smile.

"Haha, what seems like luck often requires ten inevitabilities, doesn't it? Please remember that the Cavalry is always dedicated to the security and well-being of the Empire and its capital."

He bowed his head in a greeting to Duke Diarca and then turned away. As much as it galled him, engaging further with the monstrous elder in hopes of gaining even a slight advantage was futile. The best course of action was to retreat at this point.

Chapter 745

He had always considered himself adept at enduring insults and disregard, but now he painfully realized how far he still had to go as a young man.

The members of the Cavalry, upon meeting Pruella's gaze, moved along with him to apprehend the sage and Diemon.

"Oh no! It hurts! Don't touch me! Sage!"

Before Ever could even lay a hand on him, Diemon thrashed and screamed. The sage remained silent, even as hands reached to seize him, perhaps because he sensed that Duke Diarca would feign ignorance. His slightly darkened, composed expression unnerved Pruelle.

'What is he thinking?'

Just as his hand was about to grab the sage's shoulder, the sage spoke to Duke Diarca, who was conversing with Kiolle.

"It's all a misunderstanding."

The Duke did not look back.

"The only regret I have is that I remained silent, believing that His Grace Duke Diarca would someday understand, despite knowing his overly negative perception of us."

This time, Kiolle, in a dramatic gesture, shuddered and pulled his father away. Yet, the Sage, undeterred, spoke again for the third time.

"You have never once inquired about my abilities, Your Grace. Soon, you will know. And then..."

"Oh, this man really talks too much!"

Finn blindfolded the sage and gagged him. The Sage ceased his mumbling and stood up, led away by the Cavalry members, his arms firmly held. Just as people began to lose interest in his pitiful figure, a sudden announcement came.

"Your Grace, urgent news!"

A knight of the Diarca household rushed in, shouting. The Duke, about to chide him for the noise, changed his expression upon hearing the whispered words.

His gaze swiftly moved beyond the lake of the Fourth Wall District, towards the distant, shimmering Imperial Palace in the First Wall District.

"Kiolle, it seems today is not the day for our walk. I will hear your earlier question later. We must go now."

"Where to?"

Kiolle, sensing the unusual atmosphere, blinked confusedly. The Duke did not answer but turned his head towards the captive sage. His brows furrowed in displeasure.

With his eyes and mouth covered, the sage, as if sensing something, smiled.

"The Crown Prince urgently requires his healers. We should postpone investigating this man."

The statement resounded among the Cavalry.

Ever later wrote of the subsequent events.

"Elle felt that the sinister premonition he had experienced was related to this incident. We protested, insisting that we could not hand over the captured individual, but the Duke's party countered, citing the priority of imperial family member's health and suggesting that we investigate the sage's other captured companions instead."

Duke Diarca halted the members' actions by arguing the lack of concrete evidence implicating the sage as the culprit and the fact that the sage himself had not admitted any guilt. Even as Finn attempted a final protest, knights threatened him with swords for restraint. Of course, such threats wouldn't intimidate Finn, but this act itself was a testament to the Duke's resolute intent.

To the Cavalry, any argument about their right to investigate the sage, an Awakener, was futile against the Duke's power. He hinted they might all be accused of disrespecting and insulting the imperial family member if they refused his 'proposal.'

Ultimately, the members agreed to arrest only three individuals, excluding Diemon and the sage, and had no choice but to watch as they vanished from sight.

"What transpired in the Bright Palace remains unknown, as His Majesty the Emperor has yet to speak. Our knowledge is limited to what we've uncovered through Kanna and others' inquiries. We

confirmed that two carriages secretly visited Diarca's residence at dawn today and then slipped away. One headed beyond Second Wall District, while the other escaped the capital."

One carriage was within the Second Wall District, the other had fled the capital. It was plausible that the Sage either re-entered the palace or escaped the city.

"The fault is entirely mine. I should have prepared and responded more cautiously. It's only right that I face criticism for failing to fulfill my duties as the Deputy Commander. I will report back as soon as we interrogate the three captives and ascertain the sage's whereabouts. I regret that I cannot bring you better news."

Ever and the Cavalry members deeply regretted and blamed themselves, evident in these short sentences.

Upon lifting his gaze from the letter he had been perusing, Yuder watched as Kishiar neatly folded it and placed it on the desk.

"Now, what shall we do?" pondered Kishiar.

"Ever dislikes being spared from criticism if she feels she has failed in her responsibilities. However, if you, Commander, prefer not to reprimand her, I suggest assigning her a more challenging task as a form of punishment. Others might consider hard training or harsh scolding as punishment, but that won't work for Ever," Yuder advised.

Kishiar, in a soft voice, inquired, "I've always sensed you understand and are closer to Ever Beck than others. Did you act similarly in a previous game?"

It then occurred to him... Had he not detailed the previous Cavalry to Kishiar? He had briefly mentioned past and future events, but not in such detail, judging it unnecessary.

After a moment of silence, Yuder nodded, "Yes. Ever was also the Shin Deputy Commander in a previous game, so I'm certainly more familiar with her than others. To say we're close is an overstatement, though..."

"Even after spending so long together, you still don't consider each other close?"

"That's the reality."

Yuder remembered Ever's missions and how they were executed, but they had never engaged in casual conversation or dined together. Despite both joining the Cavalry at its inception, they maintained formal titles and a certain distance in their interactions until the end. Yuder had always trusted Ever's exceptional capabilities, but personal details were a different matter.

What she liked, who she was close to, whom she married - such things weren't of interest to the Yuder of that time.

"...Such things don't necessarily define closeness. But still, having spent time together, I can more accurately predict how Ever will act in certain situations than I can with other members."

Upon hearing Yuder's explanation, Kishiar remained silent for a while. Just as Yuder, wondering if he had misspoken, was about to speak again, Kishiar enveloped him in an embrace, accompanied by a sigh that resembled laughter.

"So... what about now?"

"..."

"Do you still think the same way?"

The answer to that question had been settled long ago. Yuder, with a bitter, faint smile tinged with past regrets, shook his head.

"No. I believe I am quite close to Ever now. Though I'm not sure if Ever feels the same, I think it's unlikely that she doesn't."

"That's good to hear. From what I can tell, Ever also seems to hold you in close regard. I would have been saddened had you said otherwise."

Kishiar's perspective probably made it so, but Yuder couldn't help feeling a bit embarrassed. He brought to mind Ever from his previous life and uttered a thought he had often contemplated.

"One of the biggest mistakes I thought I made, as the previous game was coming to an end, was..."

"Not paying attention to those around you?"

"Yes."

Yuder had not trusted or wished to know about those around him. He was always sharp, always prioritizing tasks above everything else. He hadn't considered moving the other pieces on the board, trying instead to play all roles by himself.

It was no wonder he had faced defeat.

Yuder didn't voice this last thought. He didn't want Kishiar to sit alone somewhere unseen, as he had in the past, ruminating over his words and feeling upset.

Instead, he changed the subject.

"...So, how do you plan to respond to the letter?"

Chapter 746

"...So, how do you plan to respond to the letter?"

Kishiar's arms, which were holding Yuder, relaxed. His red eyes, lost in thought, scanned the surface of Ever's letter.

"We must wait for news from His Majesty's side before making a firm decision. However, I believe it is highly likely that the sage has escaped beyond the capital, and that is what we should prepare for," he reasoned.

The confidence in his conclusion, drawn merely from the letter, was notable. Kishiar soon explained his reasoning.

"It's no coincidence that Katchian summoned the sage so opportunely. After spending a long period under such ideal conditions for brainwashing, it's likely the sage was already in his grasp in some way."

Yuder had already considered this possibility.

"I too surmised that the sage, while hiding, must have strived to contact Duke Diarca and Crown Prince Katchian to find a way to save his life. Probably through the use of Baron Renbow. This would also explain how he timely escaped from the Cavalry. But how does this relate to your assumption that he headed out of the capital?"

"According to the letter, Duke Diarca was unaware of the sage's true abilities until he saw Katchian. What do you think happened after that encounter?"

Instead of a direct answer, Kishiar posed a question, his lips curling coldly. Yuder then understood why Kishiar had reached his conclusion.

"...He must have realized the true nature of sage's abilities, just as he wished."

It was uncertain how much Duke Diarca had comprehended about the ability to brainwash. However, it was clear he must have realized the sage's power to manipulate the Crown Prince at will. What could the old fox-like Duke have thought upon learning this?

One thing was certain: he wouldn't have welcomed it.

Duke Diarca's power was realized through Crown Prince Katchian. Would he really want someone else trying to influence the Crown Prince?

'Unlikely.'

But the sage must have anticipated this danger. He knew well that to gain power and survive, he must prove that his abilities were useful to the Crown Prince and, most importantly, to Duke Diarca, and pose no harm.

Kishiar nodded, as if understanding Yuder's thoughts.

"Perhaps this incident led the sage to convey a dual message to Duke Diarca: 'Don't discard me like the others. If cornered, I can use the Crown Prince to my advantage,' and simultaneously, 'But this ability could be immensely beneficial to you.' What kind of response could the Duke have to that?"

"The safest approach for Duke Diarca would be to separate the sage from the Crown Prince's side and then demand proof."

"Exactly. So it's certain that he's the one who left the palace."

"Then the sage would seek to prove his loyalty in the best possible place."

"And where might that be?"

Yuder didn't ponder long.

Throughout the cycles of life, some individuals never change, despite changing circumstances and motivations. Like Nahan, who claimed to act for the Awakeners but ultimately prioritized his own hatred, and the sage, who deceived those who trusted him in his quest for power.

Yuder felt a strong conviction that the sage, like Nahan who had vanished southward, was repeating the end of his previous life.

With this conviction, he replied in a cool voice.

"This place, it seems like the south."

The south, where the sage's original stronghold was located, was also where Kishiar, the ideal prey for Duke Diarca in the current situation, resided.

The sage, intent on proving his trustworthiness, would undoubtedly be unable to resist this temptation.

Kishiar's eyes softened gently.

"I think so too."

"I don't expect things to go as he wishes, but we must be prepared."

"Indeed. It's actually more efficient to handle everything here in one go."

Yuder admired Kishiar's ability to describe the explosive situation so calmly. He liked Kishiar's confident and relaxed tone.

'Truth be told, I understand the frustration of Ever and the others... but from my perspective, this situation is not the worst for us.'

The reason was simple. On the day the sage appeared to meet Duke Diarca, Yuder suspected that the sage's original purpose was ultimately unfulfilled.

The sage sought out Duke Diarca for help. But would Duke Diarca have readily offered assistance upon meeting him?

The sage must have known that the Duke was not a man of warm heart. Despite the sage's diligent efforts to heal the Crown Prince, disrupt the Cavalry's second recruitment, and go on a mission along with his subordinates at the Sun Palace, his actions always fell short of satisfying Duke Diarca. According to Kiolle, their first direct encounter was only recently. At that level, their relationship was barely a cautious acquaintance.

If the catastrophic failure in the south had already reached the capital, Duke Diarca might have tried to kill the sage even before giving him a chance to flee the city.

Yet, if the sage went to Duke Diarca, it was not out of mere confidence. Yuder, more familiar with Awakeners than anyone, sensed the sage's real intention was to 'forcefully persuade' Duke Diarca.

A euphemism for brainwashing, really.

Though the exact conditions for the sage's ability to brainwash were unknown, Kanna had speculated, based on cases involving members from the Star of Nagran, that 'trust' might be the key. Yuder agreed with this theory.

However, even if the conditions for exercising the ability were not fully met, it didn't mean there was no way to use it.

'It's rare, but... some mental ability users can exert a part of their power even in non-ideal situations, through special conditions or sacrifices...'

For instance, Gloe, the card-reader and former Jung Deputy Commander of the Cavalry Yuder once led in his past life.

Her power manifested through tangible, old cards. Without them, she couldn't use her abilities, so her enemies always targeted her cards.

But when Gloe was disarmed and her life hung by a thread, she miraculously created intangible cards to use her powers. Although she couldn't perform this miracle often and had to rest for days afterward, it was a remarkable feat. From this, Yuder realized that some could momentarily exert their powers even when the conditions for activation were not met.

'It was possible due to tremendous experience and effort... But come to think of it, isn't the sage also someone who has used his abilities more than any other Awakeners in the world right now?'

The sage had a history of brainwashing countless people who entered the Star of Nagran. It wouldn't be surprising if he knew a way to briefly brainwash Duke Diarca, even in unfavorable conditions.

'But, it didn't go as planned.'

The ways of the world never seem to bend to the will of just one person. The sage, potentially capable of forcibly brainwashing Duke Diarca, unexpectedly encountered Kiolle at the last moment.

Recalling all the foolish acts of Kiolle mentioned in the letters, Yuder couldn't help but let out a wry laugh.

'To think that he would suddenly appear and be of help...'

Informing Kiolle about the sage's abilities and instructing him to monitor any strange behavior of Duke Diarca was just a precautionary measure. Yuder had even added that if Kiolle acted too suspiciously, he might end up brainwashed by the sage, so he should be loud and disruptive.

Who would have thought that these instructions would become a shield that accurately thwarted the sage in that critical moment?

Thanks to this, it seemed neither Kiolle nor Duke Diarca had fallen under the sage's influence and remained sane, which was far from the worst outcome.

Soon after, Myra returned. Together, they went outside to assist in cleaning up the southern branch and completely erasing the traces of monsters, before disbanding. The south, which had been buzzing with ominous news all day, became momentarily peaceful.

The Cavalry members, busy imprisoning and interrogating the captives, had no rest, but their eyes still shone brightly, possibly due to the lingering excitement of battle. The same was true for the imperial soldiers and the recruits helping them.

The letter from Emperor Keilusa arrived that evening. The Emperor first explained that it took time to plant new mediators of his power since the previous ones were discarded, then shared the information he had gathered.

"Duke Diarca seems to have sent the sage to the south. Katchian protested, but is now quiet. The sage seems closer to Duke Diarca's men and subtly hinted he's the real perpetrator of the Sun Palace invasion, but it seems they didn't believe him. I'll try again. I heard there's been another major incident in the south. Are there any injured? If you need help, let me know.'

"His Majesty's grace is as vast as the sea."

Kishiar smiled as he burned the letter containing the information.

"Our suspicions have been confirmed now."

"Yes. Now it's time to call in those we need."

Kishiar picked up his pen. He wrote down several names from the headquarters in the capital to be dispatched for additional support to the south, then penned the name of the person in charge at the top.

"I'm thinking of appointing Ever Beck as the leader."

"Is that the punishment you've decided?"

"Yes."

It was a good decision. Ever, for sure, would relentlessly pursue the sage until he was captured for good.

Chapter 747

Kishiar had listed many names on the dispatch roster, in addition to the members' names. Among them were Enon, Hellem, and even Alik, a disciple of Thais Yulman.

"Why are you calling for Alik?" Yuder inquired.

"After confirming from the West that the ability suppression device he created was useful, I contacted him to prioritize its production over his other tasks," Kishiar explained.

"Did you, indeed?"

"Though we could keep him there and only have the device sent to us, the uncertainty of variables made it wiser to summon the creator himself. We can source the materials here as well."

Yuder recalled giving Marty, who struggled with ability control in the West, one of the first prototypes of Alik's suppression device. While it hadn't worked for Yuder, fortunately, it was of satisfactory help to Marty.

Kishiar, too, had briefly acknowledged this success in a report. It was astonishing that he hadn't forgotten about it and had separately contacted Alik. His thoroughness in overseeing the entire strategy and preparing moves, while also demonstrating remarkable insight, was impressive.

Alik's suppression device, designed for the Awakener, would be of great help in the current situation, which required dealing with and investigating a large number of such individuals.

"The response to this incident is essentially complete for now. With more dispatches than expected, the speed of movement will be key," Kishiar noted, after sealing the last part of his written correspondence with a coded signature.

Yuder watched the messenger bird, which had fed to its heart's content, take off into the night sky, bearing the letter in a pouch tied to its leg, destined for the capital.

In the few days since arriving in the south, numerous events had transpired. They were simultaneous yet intricately connected, like scattered bombs detonating in unison. The underground fighting ring in the south trying to devour the region. The death and danger to the successor candidate of the Herne Ducal Family, which had greatly influenced the imperial politics in his previous life. The strange crack and monsters, reminding him of a disaster he believed would come only years later.

The strife within the Star of Nagran that even affected the Cavalry, and the Southerners who were secretly entangled in all these events.

To Yuder, the most critical among these were the bizarre crack and the Southerners.

‘I’ve found or halfway solved solutions to prevent the others from recurring. But these two are different.’

The Southerners, suspected of causing the crack, were either dead or captured. Even the leader, Aton, had been safely transported here by the Cavalry and was still unconscious, with interrogation scheduled for the following day.

But could he be certain that the phenomenon of the bizarre crack would not recur?

If the seeds of a disaster, similar to his previous life, had already been sown, and today's events were just the beginning?

Then what Yuder had to face was no longer within the realm of human affairs.

Only he remembered the great earthquake in the South, a tremendous disaster that he must somehow avert.

"The messenger bird is long out of sight, yet you're still deep in thought. What's on your mind?"

His complex thoughts halted at the gentle voice from behind. Yuder closed the window and turned around. The man, leaning against the desk and looking at him, quietly smiled.

Finally, a hint of fatigue crept into Yuder's eyes, which had until then maintained an unwavering, iron-like vigor.

He hesitated slightly before replying, "I was reflecting on today's events and pondering over the phenomenon of the bizarre crack."

"That means among all that happened today, the crack worried you the most. Do you think they're related to the 'disaster' you said is coming?"

Indeed, with Kishiar, there was seldom a need for lengthy explanations.

"Yes. I don't think it's an undue concern."

"It's hard to believe, even having seen it with my own eyes, that people could invoke this crack. If it's happened once, it's certainly possible again."

Kishiar produced a stone with a black hue from his pocket, a relic retrieved from the possessions of the Southern merchants who had chosen death.

"This seems to be a fragment of an ancient dragon's bone."

"A dragon's bone, you say?"

"You remember the medium Thais Yulman created for storing the power of the Red Stone, don't you? This has similar properties to the ancient dragon's heart fragment used in that, but of a lower grade. Simply put, it's one of the materials capable of containing power."

Thais Yulman had successfully created a medium to transfer the pure power of the Red Stone, using a mix of an ancient dragon's heart fragment, ancient fairy dust, and an element called Eucalractium. The dragon's heart fragment and fairy dust were premium materials known for their ability to store power.

"Even if it's of a lower grade, a dragon's bone isn't common. It's mostly used as a core in magic artifacts, so ordinary people rarely see the raw material."

"If it can contain power, does it still hold something inside?"

Kishiar shook his head. "No. It's empty, without any energy."

"Then..."

"It's one of two possibilities. Either the energy it once contained has been completely depleted, or it was intended to hold something else."

Kishiar, mumbling to himself, played with the black stone, tossing it lightly in the air before catching it and putting it back in his pocket.

"We'll know more once the dispatched personnel arrive."

Even as the black stone disappeared from view, Yuder's thoughts on the crack and the impending earthquake didn't completely fade. Were there aspects he had missed in the heat of battle? Should he delve deeper into his past memories for anything that might help now? Numerous plans and memories churned chaotically in his anxious mind.

Watching Yuder's unsettled expression, Kishiar took off his dust-covered coat and hung it on the chair.

Yuder, slightly taken aback, swallowed his surprise and asked, "Commander? Why are you..."

"Hm? I need to wash. We've done everything we can for today. I can't stay dusty forever."

With a playful wink, Kishiar gestured towards the adjoining room beyond the desk. Yuder suddenly realized where they were.

'Ah... this room used to belong to the noble who owned this building, with an attached bathroom and bedroom.'

The Southern branch's building was originally an old noble's mansion, left unused and vacant. Despite its wear, elements throughout hinted at its once-grand past.

In the temporary office that Kishiar was using, originally the master bedroom of the house, the members had converted the largest bedroom into a makeshift meeting room and office, turning the slightly smaller adjoining room into a bedroom. Unusually for an office, a bathroom was just beyond a single door.

Yuder, careful not to stare too intently at Kishiar as he unbuttoned his shirt, quickly averted his eyes. Even though he was well aware of what lay beneath those clothes, now was not the time to focus on that.

"I've stayed too late. My apologies. Please, rest comfortably."

"Are you really planning to leave just like that?"

"..."

His feet, poised to turn away, halted at the sound of that low voice. It felt as though he was bound by some power, yet he knew all too well that wasn't the case.

"You're thinking now is not the time for this, right? Planning to go back and immerse yourself in work again without even lying down."

"..."

Yuder had doubted several times whether Kishiar truly lacked the ability to read minds, but this time was the most convincing.

Yuder, rather than denying it, remained silent. Kishiar let out a laugh, akin to a sigh, much like when he had embraced him earlier.

"It's okay."

"..."

"Look at me."

"..."

Chapter 748

"It's okay."

"..."

"Look at me."

"..."

Drawn by his voice, Yuder slowly lifted his gaze which he had been casting down.

The first thing he saw was the bare body inside the completely unbuttoned shirt. The smooth and firm skin, devoid of any scars, and the endless, hill-like muscles rhythmically swelled and receded with the owner's breath. Yuder stared at it for a long time before lifting his gaze a little higher.

Next, he saw a straight, long collarbone like the horizon, and above that, neck muscles stretched out like old tree branches. Following these branches led to golden hair, shining through the leaves like sunlight. Once Yuder started looking, he found it impossible to stop.

When Yuder's gaze finally reached his destination, resting upon the gentle curve of his lips and red eyes, Kishiar smiled deeply as if to celebrate this arrival.

"How is it?"

"...What exactly are you referring to?"

"I mean, do you feel like resting a bit now?"

Could one suddenly feel the need to rest just by looking at someone's body? Logically, it was a ridiculous thought, but Yuder found himself unable to argue.

It wasn't that seeing Kishiar made him want to lie down and rest. However, the urge to be by his side, overpowering time and circumstance, was undeniable.

He had avoided looking directly because he knew this feeling would melt everything else in his mind if Kishiar wished it, just like now.

Yuder sighed softly, and Kishiar let out a laugh.

"Listen. I understand your eagerness to immerse yourself in urgent matters. But no matter how many tasks there are, what can be done today can only be done today. For instance... celebrating together with the one you most wanted to show, after using the divine sword and aura for the first time in battle against monsters."

Yuder was momentarily stunned by this unexpected statement.

Usually, those who suggested he rest did so on the premise that human strength and energy are not infinite. The human body cannot function eternally without recharging. It was a reasoning that inevitably made sense.

But Kishiar presented a different perspective for resting now.

Today marked his first public display of fighting using the divine sword and aura. Therefore, it was the only day they could commemorate this together.

How could Yuder ignore or overlook such a statement, knowing that Kishiar, who had to conceal his strength for so long, had for a moment fought freely?

Kishiar asked with an air of finality.

"Will you not join me, then?"

Defeated. Had Yuder been able to out-argue Kishiar La Orr, he likely wouldn't be in this place. From the moment he was drawn to look at Kishiar by his words, this outcome was all but inevitable.

"...Very well."

Yuder finally responded, smiling at the man.

Steam rose like swirling mists above the large, antique bathtub, built in a style from centuries ago. Though it was large enough to easily accommodate several people, the two men inside sat overlapped as if in a much smaller tub.

Yuder gazed at the rippling water at chest level, feeling the heartbeat of the man behind him pressing against his back. Even sitting here, cleansed of dust, blood, and the fluids of monsters, he found himself unable to ponder any thoughts.

The only sensations he was aware of were the warm emptiness in his head and the languid embrace of Kishiar's scent, as if it had been waiting for him.

In fact, Kishiar's fragrance had been intensely strong even before entering the bathroom. Yuder only noticed it now, not because they were closer due to their nearly embracing posture, but because Yuder's mind had been so preoccupied with other matters.

Water droplets trickling down his wet hair, annoyingly tapping against his eyelashes, didn't prompt Yuder to act. He simply stared blankly until the large hand that had been around his waist emerged from the water and gently brushed his bangs away.

"...Thank you."

However, after sweeping aside the hair, the hand did not retreat. It lightly caressed his bare forehead, tracing the path of the water droplets down to his nose, then to his cheeks and chin. The moment the hand lightly touched the nape of his neck, a slippery yet ticklish sensation made his spine shiver. The contact of wet skin heightened the sensitivity of an already sensitive area.

Yet Yuder, stiffening his shoulders, did not reject the touch. Leaning his head back with a hot breath, the hand finally withdrew, replaced by lips softly touching his forehead.

The journey of those lips from his forehead, tracing the path previously touched by the hand, felt like a predetermined sequence, culminating in a kiss on the lips.

The kiss was deeper and slower than usual.

This deepened the languor in both his body and mind, making it almost too difficult to keep his eyelids open.

After the kiss, Yuder exhaled deeply, trying not to close his eyes, as if fearing the weight pressing down on his body.

Kishiar whispered softly in his ear.

“Are you sleepy?”

“No.”

He wasn’t sleepy, just feeling heavy.

“You can sleep, it’s okay.”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to be together for the memory?”

“Being together still counts even if one falls asleep. That’s enough.”

“That’s not possible.”

What was enough? Yuder thought, adjusting his position to clear his mind. He turned his body, which had been resting on Kishiar's lap, to face him, eliciting a laugh of disappointment from the man.

“We’re farther apart now. But, I can see your face better, so this is good too.”

Yuder intently watched Kishiar's hand, playfully scooping and pushing water towards him, concerned about the arm that had sustained a light injury earlier. Fortunately, his hand appeared as

healthy and intact as before. With no significant pain in his own hand, Yuder concluded the healer introduced by Myra was unquestionably skilled.

Yuder resolved to establish immediate contact with that healer tomorrow. With their stay in the south now confirmed to be longer, securing such support was essential.

‘Still... we must avoid a repeat of today’s events.’

Yuder’s mind briefly buzzed with plans for emergency supplies, securing local allies, and organizing available human and material resources, before fatigue submerged these thoughts again.

“Are you still worried about this hand?”

Kishiar seemed to notice Yuder's gaze and waved his hand.

"Of course, I am concerned. The Commander could have suffered a more severe injury."

"I won't say I was just lucky. It was a lapse in my judgment."

Kishiar, with furrowed brows, silently smiled.

"I knew monsters, even of the same kind, don't share identical traits, yet I erred. I failed to fully grasp the difference between observing from afar and facing them directly. That oversight nearly put you in danger while you were assisting. A mere hand injury is a small price to pay. It was foolish of me."

Kishiar's self-critique seemed too harsh to be merely about his combat skills. Yuder, thinking Kishiar was perhaps reflecting on his battle prowess under the guise of rest, quickly shook his head in disagreement.

"That's not correct, Commander. Your judgment under those circumstances was the best possible. If anything, it was my responsibility to identify and communicate the monster's traits, and my failure to respond promptly is to blame. If anyone should bear the cost, it should be me."

"That seems even less correct to me."

From that moment, the two began to meticulously dissect their recent battle with the monster, discussing every movement and sword direction in detail. Essentially, each was trying to prove and persuade that while the other had made the best choice, they themselves had not.

Of course, no one was persuaded, and though a considerable amount of time passed without a conclusion, the atmosphere gradually became softer and more heated.

"When you faced the eleventh monster, Commander, you changed the direction of your sword to draw it in. That didn't seem like your original intention, am I right?"

"Yes, that's true. Initially, I intended to push it away. But somehow, it felt like the right move. Turned out to be a good decision in the end."

"I agree with you there. If you had pushed it away, it would have been difficult to effectively check the twelfth one due to the distance. Though you said it wasn't a conscious decision, Commander, with your broad vision, you must have been observing the twelfth's movement pattern. So..."

"Ah, I see. So this 'instinct' that comes during battle, beyond the target I'm directly looking at, is informed by information from my peripheral vision? That's an insightful analysis. It would have been hard to understand without experiencing it myself. So when you face multiple enemies..."

The Cavalry often reflected on their battles afterward, discussing tactics and post-battle scenarios. However, this level of detailed and direct analysis of each combat technique, akin to analyzing a sports game, was not typical.

Looking closely at every small movement in battle was entirely different from discussing tactics. Tactics required a certain degree of objectivity, as they needed to be viewed from above the battlefield. But this was neither objective nor professional. It was merely a sharing of memories that only those who had fought together or who were deeply interested in swordsmanship or martial arts theory could enjoy.

Yet, strangely, he didn't want to end this seemingly pointless conversation.

Yuder, realizing somewhat belatedly that he was quite immersed and enjoying this discussion, felt a peculiar sense of embarrassment.

'Wasn't this conversation supposed to be about something else?'

So engrossed were they in their conversation that they hadn't noticed how much time had passed, and the water had cooled considerably. Yuder casually released some energy, warming the entire bath. The water, which had cooled, suddenly emitted steam as if freshly heated.

Kishiar, realizing what Yuder had done, paused and opened his eyes.

"You warmed the water?"

"I didn't realize how much time had passed. We can't let our bodies cool down."

Kishiar, unfazed, simply widened his eyes. It was then that Yuder realized, not just how absorbed he was in the conversation, but something else too.

"The flow of our conversation just now..."

"Haha."

"It was indeed your intention, Commander."

In hindsight, Yuder should have realized it earlier. Kishiar was a master of conversation, adept at steering discussions as he pleased. Even with Yuder as his counterpart, changing the course of the conversation was effortless if he so intended.

The delayed realization was partly due to fatigue, and also...

"But it was enjoyable, wasn't it?"

Yes. The enjoyment of the conversation was indeed the reason.

Initially, Kishiar had drawn upon all his combat knowledge, hoping to convince Yuder not to regard his first battle as a failure or an unpleasant memory. Yuder was most knowledgeable about combat

techniques related to the abilities of the Awakeners, but he was also confident in his understanding of swordsmanship, various weapon skills, and martial arts, not falling behind in any of these areas.

Even in areas he was less familiar with, his abundant combat experience helped fill any gaps. Naturally, examples from past experiences and newly discovered knowledge intermingled in their conversation, to which Kishiar showed great interest.

Conversely, while Kishiar might have been far behind Yuder in combat experience, he possessed a natural analytical ability and a vast academic knowledge so extensive that its depths were unfathomable. Many of the unusual insights he mentioned were difficult to grasp through experience alone.

It was only natural for Yuder to be captivated by Kishiar's eloquence as he generously shared his theoretical knowledge.

Yuder realized that he had never before engaged in such an objective and enthusiastic analysis and discussion of his past battles without any specific purpose. In his previous life, he had no desire for such conversations, and his comrades in this life were still too inexperienced in both knowledge and battle to freely discuss combat with him.

Kishiar spoke with a hint of amusement in his voice.

"It's only natural for one who wields a sword to enjoy discussions about swordsmanship. I certainly do, especially when it comes to analyzing battles I've personally fought in. How could one not find it interesting?"

"I didn't start this conversation for fun."

"So, did you dislike it?"

"...No."

Yuder wondered if everything had played out exactly as Kishiar intended but decided not to dwell on it any further. His mind and heart, heavy with fatigue until a moment ago, now felt surprisingly light.

"The conversation shifted direction midway, so we didn't reach a conclusion, but I hope Commander, you won't take today's unexpected events during the battle to heart."

"Shouldn't one who is harsh on their own mistakes be equally stern with others?"

"That's irrelevant."

Perhaps it was the lightness of his body and mind that made it easier for thoughts previously weighed down in his head to flow smoothly from his lips.

"If you, Commander ask why, I just want to say that during today's battle with the monsters, you seemed more free-spirited than ever."

Kishiar's expression, previously cheerful, shifted subtly.

"Ah, that doesn't mean I thought you looked constrained before or that you were neglecting the seriousness of the battle... Anyway, I thought it looked good. So, if possible, I hope that in the future you can be more..."

What more could he add to accurately convey the emotions he felt then? He wanted to say that he hoped Kishiar could continue to engage in battle freely and joyfully. Before Yuder could find the words, Kishiar spoke.

"No, you don't need to say more. I think I understand what you mean."

There was no trace of the previous mirth in Kishiar's voice.

Yuder tried to discern his expression, but Kishiar suddenly scooped up water with his hands and washed his face, making it impossible to see.

The only sound that filled the space between them was the gentle splashing of Kishiar repeatedly scooping and pouring water over his face.

After a few more repetitions, the man finally slowly lowered the hands that had been covering his face.

In place of his familiar smile, Kishiar's expression now mirrored the freedom he had displayed in the heat of battle.

Yuder's heart clenched as if gripped by an unseen hand, beating wildly for a moment.

Slowly wiping the water trailing down his chin, Kishiar spoke in a subdued voice.

"I mentioned it as a commemoration, but honestly, I didn't consider it truly worthy of such... until now."

His whisper, carrying the heat of subterranean lava, seemed to transfer its warmth to the listener.

"Only after hearing your words did I realize that it indeed might have been something commendable."

"..."

"Perhaps it's because it's the first time I've been told that more could be done."

A self-deprecating smile flickered at the edges of his blurred words, his red eyes holding a multitude of emotions as they fixed on Yuder.

A voice that only Yuder Ail in this world could hear continued.

"To know that someone else, not just me, clearly understands what I felt for the first time today... it's joyous, almost miraculous."

"..."

"Yes. I'm happy."

Repeating the words, Kishiar's lips formed a bright smile.

"Thank you for saying that."

If Yuder had not understood the weight of years behind those words, he might not have felt the same way now.

But Yuder could guess the countless moments of enduring patience that Kishiar had weathered to finally say those words. He might have been a man who could have vanished without ever experiencing the liberation he felt today.

No one who saw or heard of his single-handed battle against the numerous monsters today could imagine those hidden moments, nor would they guess that this man with such a smile was a young man not even thirty years old.

Yuder's heart leaped wildly, a flame surging up from deep within, sending shivers down his spine.

He couldn't hold it in any longer. He had to express this overwhelming feeling somehow.

Yuder rose and collapsed into Kishiar's neck. The man, as if he had been waiting, embraced Yuder in his arms and buried his head. The water was churning and overflowing, but no one cared.

Their lips met in an inevitable collision, with no clear initiator.

Chapter 750

Yuder rose and collapsed into Kishiar's neck. The man, as if he had been waiting, embraced Yuder in his arms and buried his head. The water was churning and overflowing, but no one cared.

Their lips met in an inevitable collision, with no clear initiator.

Instead of the previous languid lethargy, a powerful sensation, as if souls were intertwining and being sucked in, took its place. Every time their wet skin clashed and tongues entangled, Yuder felt emotions, not in words but like water droplets, tapping inside his head. It was like a conduit of shared emotions created from the entwined desires of both. Along this invisible path, things deeper and more secretive than words flowed ceaselessly, up and down.

Describing the feeling of another's emotions seeping inside was difficult. In his previous life, Yuder often couldn't distinguish between his own feelings and those from Kishiar.

But now it was different. The emotions coming from Kishiar were so immense and vast that it would be strange not to notice them.

Yuder lightly shivered as he received overwhelming ecstasy and a sensation so full it tightened his heart, far more intense than what the eyes could perceive.

Emotions beyond one's capacity to accept sometimes felt akin to pain. This was because Yuder knew not many kinds of emotions, and among them, pain was the most familiar and diverse.

However, not everything similar to pain was agony. Although Yuder couldn't yet name all the tremendous emotions he felt with Kishiar, he felt certain he now understood this truth.

He struggled to breathe, desperately trying to assimilate the thick emotions without pushing them away.

If these were the feelings Kishiar harbored for him at the moment, Yuder didn't want to let even a single one slip away. He had to somehow swallow them, make them his own.

As he accepted the flood of emotions that almost burst his body, his grip on Kishiar's shoulder tightened, and even their entwined tongues quivered. Kishiar, embracing this fervently, held Yuder's hips and pulled him in even deeper. It was difficult to breathe in such a deep embrace, but that only made it more exhilarating. Yuder wished for even more skin contact, even if it meant breaking apart.

“Hnn... Ugh.”

Kishiar, too, was receiving this shared emotion, not just Yuder. At Yuder's longing, Kishiar's eyelashes fluttered violently in response. Yuder exhaled a suppressed breath of pleasure as he felt the arms around his waist tighten.

Standing before the immense wave of emotion felt both terrifying and ecstatic. The feeling of being engulfed, never to resurface, was imminent, yet he did not wish to escape.

Like a small being alone on a sandy beach, he opened himself up, willingly accepting the wave crashing over him.

“Ah...”

Yuder aggressively swallowed the saliva flowing through their entangled kiss. Without parting lips, moving his lower abdomen and legs, he wrapped himself tightly around Kishiar's waist submerged in the water. With the splashing water, two hot, firm forms slid between their pressed bellies.

The sensation of swallowing saliva felt like igniting a fire within, a pleasure so intense. The submerged lower abdomen, overwhelmed by this vivid pleasure, instinctively quivered. The mere rubbing between the thighs, already scorching hot, set the mind ablaze. Yet, the fleeting contact with the other intensified this sensation, igniting the nerves like a spark.

Yuder, repeatedly sliding, touching, then parting in response to these sensations, finally could not restrain himself and grasped both organs with his hand.

"Uh..."

"Ah...!"

Grasping both in one hand was impossible, so he merely held them close, eliciting a pleasure far greater than before. The sounds he couldn't suppress echoed off the steamy bathroom walls, reflecting like in a cave, feeling shamelessly lewd.

Yuder, while caressing the sensitive tips with his fingers, gazed at Kishiar. Through his hazy vision, he saw red eyes, just as lost in him. His own reflection in those eyes appeared more like a fierce hunter about to pounce on its prey rather than a lover gazing at their beloved. Although his face seemed more angry than sweet, the same could be said for Kishiar.

Every time Kishiar received Yuder's emotions, he would look down, moan softly, and repeatedly grip and release his hip. The kissing of the nape, the hot breaths, and the sucking of the chest were all intensely sensual.

Captivated by a poignant longing, Kishiar La Orr thought of nothing but Yuder. Could there be a more provocative, scandalous being?

Yuder wanted to see him unrestrained in his pleasure. Gripping and stroking harder, he pushed their hips together. Kishiar released a trembling breath between the lips buried below Yuder's collarbone.

The breath, almost like a laugh, made Kishiar's emotions surge into Yuder again.

An unbearable, painful outcry, wanting to pour everything out.

A thrill, as if being drained entirely.

But above all these emotions was an indescribable feeling, shaking and tearing at the heart.

This emotion, clogging the throat, made all other pleasures seem tiny.

Overwhelmed, Yuder found it hard to breathe. His eyes burned with heat.

Unable to contain these emotions within, it felt like a world filled only with Kishiar was about to burst.

Perhaps, it already had...

"Ha..."

Forgetting even to breathe, Yuder twisted his waist. The organ he held felt swollen, and soon, his seed spurted forth.

"Ah...!"

In a tremendous explosion of sensation, sound seemed to fade away.

"Ha... ha..."

"...Are you okay?"

After a moment, Kishiar's voice sounded distant. Yuder, slowly regaining his vision, blinked lazily. He had slipped during his climax and was now lying atop Kishiar. Looking down at the hand that had held on until the end, he saw it covered in a mix of water and seed.

Though he had just released, Yuder's organ was still half-erect. But more noticeable was Kishiar's, still unreleased, swollen even more than before, filling his hand to the brim.

Previously, it had boasted an impressive size, but this was the first time it had grown to such an extent.

“Don’t look there, look at me instead.”

Yuder, unable to avert his gaze from the lower abdomen, felt a hand reach out, grasping his cheek and guiding his eyes upward. In stark contrast to the alarmingly swollen lower part, the pale face, flushed and damp, was erotically captivating to the point of losing one's senses.

“...What did you say?”

“I asked if you're alright.”

“Yes... I'm fine.”

Traces of the intense emotions that had surged to the brink, overwhelming the depths of his soul, still lingered. The remnants of those emotions within him made his head feel foggy and clouded, struggling to continue his thoughts.

Perhaps this sensation was akin to the feeling of being drunk. It seemed a possibility.

Lost in these thoughts, Yuder heard Kishiar whisper in a soft voice.

“Shall we wash up and leave?”

“...Do you mean to stop?”

He thought that if Kishiar suggested stopping just because he looked a bit tired, given his current aroused state, he wouldn't stay quiet.

“Please, speak frankly.”

Seeing the resolute spark in Yuder's eyes, Kishiar stared at him for a moment before bursting into laughter. Even his laughter seemed more sexually charged than usual, perhaps due to his dampness.

“If I'm to speak frankly... of course, I don't want to stop. But if we do it here, we'll get cold.”