

Turning 771

Chapter 771

"It would be best if nothing happens, but if it does repeat, this time it will go as planned. I'll help ensure that."

His words felt like unfounded confidence, yet they were overwhelmingly positive and warm.

Since nothing had yet happened, it was uncertain whether his words would come true or not.

However, Yuder had no doubt that Kishiar La Orr would keep his word. Even if his words seemed light and absurd, Yuder knew the sincerity behind them wasn't light at all.

This deep assurance came from knowing that someone was there to trust and rely on, even if something happened to Yuder himself. It was fortunate that this person, who believed in Yuder's words and memories without condition, had the capability and will to achieve goals on his behalf.

Thus, Yuder felt a bit pathetic for still holding back things he couldn't easily tell this man, who so firmly believed and supported him.

Yuder then left Kishiar's embrace, gauged the direction to head next, and used his power. As he leaped upon the winds, he immediately felt a presence following him.

Yuder crossed a distance of dozens of houses in an instant, much faster than before. He leaped over Charloin's night guards, who were diligently guarding the gate without noticing someone flying overhead, and passed the wall dividing the city from the outside without trouble.

As he flew across the desolate plains, unseen in the lantern light, relying on the moonlight and stars, Yuder felt the faint breath of the man following him. It was a presence so slight that it was imperceptible unless focused on, but for Yuder, that was enough.

Soon, a new town appeared, smaller in scale and more like a countryside settlement than Charloin, yet with a considerable population.

Yuder paused his movement atop the highest tree in the area, watching Kishiar stop following him. Kishiar's golden hair was slightly disheveled, yet he didn't seem too exhausted, almost sparking a sense of rivalry in Yuder.

"Is this Mclara?"

"Yes."

"It's not near the harbor. What should we know about this place?"

"This is where the poor, driven from Charloin, usually settle. The area is cramped with old and dangerous buildings and is more populated than it seems."

"So, even the appearance of a monster before the disaster could complicate things greatly."

"Yes. The biggest issue here is that only a few Imperial soldiers maintain order, so preparing for that is crucial. The local lord is somewhat greedy, but he's easy to talk to, so sending someone should quickly resolve things."

"Is this from the previous game?"

"Yes. But obviously, we're not acquainted now. Back then, the Southern branch of the Cavalry was here."

"I see."

Yuder didn't explain why the branch couldn't move to Charloin at the time. Kishiar would probably guess the reason.

"If he's the type to accept bribes to allow a Cavalry branch without objection, he shouldn't be too difficult to handle."

See? Without saying anything, he already understands everything.

Yuder nodded and pointed towards the lord's mansion, not far from there.

"Yes, the place where the lord resides is over there. Next to it is where the Imperial Army stays, and frankly, there are no other decent facilities beyond these two."

"I understand."

Yuder then lifted off towards the next place to inspect. As he headed towards the next area, the distant sea gradually faded from view, and the grass and trees started to become sparse. It meant they were nearing the desert.

"I never thought I'd personally assess the desert terrain of the south. Quite fascinating."

The man who had been following behind quickened his pace and moved alongside Yuder, whispering.

"Have you never seen it before?"

"No. The villa where I stayed in my childhood was near the sea, and no one was brave enough to show a troublesome child the dangerous desert. I asked a few times and then tried to escape on my own, but my mother had foreseen this and had people ready to stop me. It's a rather regrettable memory."

Kishiar, referring to his younger self as a troublesome child, smiled.

'Considering the reactions of the servants I met when I visited the palace where he stayed during his princely days, and the fact that he wasn't taken to the desert despite his requests, he must have been quite a handful.'

Even now, Kishiar often behaved in unexpectedly bizarre ways.

The foresight of the former Empress, who had anticipated and prevented Kishiar's escape attempt, also seemed remarkable.

'But Kishiar isn't one to give up on his intentions after just one failure. Perhaps things were different in his childhood.'

"Didn't you try to escape again after that failure?"

"Hmm... If I tried to escape again, the kind and gentle child who helped me would have been in big trouble. So, I gave up. I couldn't hurt others just for my own amusement, right?"

The young child who had helped the young prince in the southern villa.

Although the term was unfamiliar, the story seemed somewhat familiar. A face suddenly flashed through Yuder's mind. After a moment of silence, he asked.

"By any chance, is that child... someone I know?"

"Of course. He grew up to be my excellent adjutant."

"..."

It was indeed Nathan Zuckerman.

The disparity between the image of the large, stern knight and the kind, gentle child was significant, but Yuder chose not to comment. He was thankful he had seen the mage Hellem treat Nathan Zuckerman with affection, like a small child, beforehand.

As Yuder remained silent, Kishiar chuckled softly and changed the subject.

"The south is still known for its abundance of ancient mysteries. It's said because of the many ruins, but the landforms contribute to that reputation as well. Here, the sea is close, yet one can see a vast desert. It's neither low on water nor does it rain much. The coexistence of such opposites, both dry and wet, is surely a mystery, isn't it?"

"Now that you mention it... Yes, it is."

It was so common that Yuder hadn't thought of it as strange, but the south indeed had both the sea and the desert.

"People in the south believe that this is a remnant of the great catastrophe that struck a thousand years ago."

"I didn't know that."

"It's too obvious to us. But if you ask someone from the south, you'll get a different perspective. It seems there are quite a few legends around here."

Yuder, using his power to fly, gazed at the distant, faintly visible horizon. As it was the direction of the desert, there was nothing to obscure the horizon – no mountains, trees, or buildings.

'The place where things that shouldn't coexist, coexist...'

The more he thought about it, the more this phrase circled in his mind. In the midst of a nagging feeling that he was on the verge of a revelation, Yuder, just as he entered the third area, suddenly remembered someone's voice and unwittingly spoke out.

"Ah..."

"What's the matter?"

"Because of what you just said, I think I understand why Aton and the Southern merchants chose the south as the place to commit their deeds."

"You think you know why they chose the south?"

Overwhelmed by his realization, Yuder stopped in a place where he wouldn't be noticed and faced Kishiar.

"Aton once told me that this land contains all the conditions for becoming immeasurably imbalanced. What they did was merely add to the effects of an imbalance that would have occurred eventually. They said that all conditions were complete on that day. Do you remember?"

"He did say that."

"Where else is there a land as imbalanced as this, where desert and sea coexist? If a land already imbalanced is prone to cracks, monsters, and even disasters, then what they did was really just..."

Before Yuder could finish, the man who always seemed to understand him better than anyone, his eyes widened in realization.

"So, It's not that they brought about a disaster and cracks from scratch with human power, but they used magic, life, or something to stir up an already existing 'imbalance'. It might seem similar, but there's a significant difference. That's what you're getting at, right?"

"Yes."

Until now, Yuder had thought that Aton and the Southerners merely fulfilled some conditions like offering sacrifices in a magic circle to summon cracks and monsters.

But this explanation didn't fully clarify why they specifically chose the South. However, if one considers that a disaster might have occurred here eventually and the Southerners merely ignited it, the story changes.

"It's easier to go from 5 to 10 than from 0 to 10, if you already know where the 5 is."

"That's right. If Aton and his backers knew that 'the aftermath of an imbalance that could have occurred someday' would come in such a way, then that means..."

"In the previous game, all the places where similar problems occurred were already known to them, and there existed the possibility that they could commit the same acts at any time, as long as they could shake the imbalance."

That was exactly what Yuder wanted to say.

"...If that's true, then the events of the previous game could happen much faster and more frequently this time, depending on the situation."

Yuder clenched his teeth tightly.

After quickly covering the remaining areas, they returned to Charloin. During their return, the dark night had lightened, and the sun began to rise in the east.

When they finally leaped over the gates of Charloin and landed on the roof of the Southern branch of the Cavalry, the sun was fully risen.

"It took us about half a day exactly."

Kishiar whispered.

"Are you tired?"

"I'm fine. What about you, Commander...?"

"I'm perfectly fine too."

Yuder had expected Kishiar to suggest going in to rest or to have a meal, but Kishiar remained unusually silent. He just looked at Yuder for a long while.

"...Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Just now, our conversation sparked a certain thought."

A faint smile appeared on Kishiar's lips.

"Old people believed nightmares were like the touch of mist flowing from where the Black Moon, chased away by the Sun God, hides. Similar to monsters."

" ... "

"It just occurred to me that the day you had a bad dream was also the day when 'the aftermath of the imbalance' caused a crack to open and monsters to appear. It might be an overthought, but still."

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As if a massive stone had been cast into an already stormy lake, a second wave of shock surged through Yuder's heart.

Kishiar's words held truth. The day of his nightmare coincided with the appearance of a strange crack above the Cavalry's southern branch. But could there truly be a link between these events?

It sounded absurd. However, even Kishiar, acknowledging it as 'overthought,' couldn't resist voicing the thought, suggesting multiple implications.

If he had truly believed the possibility to be zero, he would not have spoken at all.

Struggling to comprehend, Yuder looked into Kishiar's eyes and hesitantly spoke, "When you say the nightmare was the... touch of the Black Moon, what exactly do you mean by that?"

"In the early days, when I had just settled in Peletta, I often had disturbing dreams. The elders there said such nightmares were like the misty touch flowing from where the Black Moon hides, inescapable but eventually disappearing with the sunrise. It was their way of offering solace."

This bore a striking resemblance to the scriptural tales of monsters born from the blood of the Black Moon.

The power of the Black Moon, once pervasive, had retreated, eclipsed by those who manifested the Sun God's power. Yet, its cursed blood remained, infiltrating the world through cracks, manifesting as monsters.

Everyone, including Yuder, had always believed this to be true.

Seeing Yuder's furrowed brow, Kishiar broke the silence, "Shall we delve deeper? If monsters are born from the cursed blood of the Black Moon, where does this Black Moon reside?"

"Perhaps beyond this world... if it indeed exists."

"Exactly. The Black Moon's power has withdrawn into eternal darkness. The continuous emergence of monsters through cracks could be evidence, as the First Duke Tain speculated, of something beyond our world. Remember what we found in the torn pages we found in the ancient tomb a while ago? He used quite unique descriptions."

"I'm not certain about the specifics."

Yuder remembered the summary Kishiar had provided from those torn papers but couldn't recall every exact phrase.

Nodding, Kishiar began reciting without hesitation, "Some 'cursed beings' had the ears of a rabbit, the wings of a bird, the tail of a dog, and the claws of a mole. Others bore the eyes of a cat and the scales of a fish. 'The Word of God' speaks of these mixed beings as coming from the world of the Black Moon... This part, specifically."

Emphasizing 'The Word of God,' Kishiar's voice resonated with Yuder, who then remembered the moment. A vast catacomb hidden among ancient burial grounds, filled with the stench of age-old dust and littered with monster corpses.

"The Word of God is indeed the scriptures. But the standard scriptures we read don't explicitly mention the 'world of the Black Moon.' I've verified this since arriving in the South."

"But isn't the meaning itself almost similar to what we know?"

"Yes, It could have been merely a summarized expression, but what if it's not?"

Silence followed, ponderous and deep.

"People think deeply about the scriptures being almost the only records from ancient times before the Great Destruction. However, few know that the current scriptures have undergone about three revisions over time. The priests did this mainly to soften the cruel content and simplify complex words and meanings for everyone's understanding."

Kishiar noted that only the Grand Temple held the original, unedited scriptures and they were not immediately accessible. But his intent was clear.

"So, the term 'world of the Black Moon' might have been altered and lost through this process to the meaning we know today?"

"That's right. The meaning is indeed similar to what we know. Yet, when you think about it, it could also be completely different. Like you answered earlier, guessing that the Black Moon is vaguely somewhere outside our world is one thing, but referring to that outside world as the Black Moon's realm is quite another."

With that, Kishiar steered the conversation to the main point.

"Let's reconsider, changing the words we use. The ancients thought that nightmares flowed from the world where the Black Moon hid. Just as monsters flow from the blood that falls through the cracks, they thought the same of nightmares. In fact, they seemed to think that all sorts of bad things come along with monsters in this way."

Yuder slowly nodded in response to Kishiar's query about the common superstition that touching freshly spawned monsters could transfer misfortune or madness.

Just as some viewed the byproducts of hunted monsters as symbols of fortune, many believed that newly appeared monsters brought all kinds of ill-fated curses.

"But now we've learned that these cracks could originate from what the Southerners call 'imbalanced lands,' and even human intentions might lure monsters. If a significant nightmare suddenly visited you in such a situation, it's not too far-fetched to think there might be a connection between the two, right?"

Kishiar didn't know the specifics of Yuder's dream.

The earlier mention of a mist-like touch had eerily reminded Yuder of the white gloves and their tactile sensation in his dream, yet it seemed unrelated to the dream itself. Nevertheless, the expressions Kishiar used felt like they were piercing the core of Yuder's nightmare.

Breathing deeply, Yuder conceded, "That could be possible."

"Of course, you've only had such a bad dream once. To confirm the speculation of a link between nightmares and strange cracks, similar occurrences would need to happen more often. I hope they don't, so let's consider my words as mere premature speculation."

Kishiar's sincerity was palpable in his hope. Unsure of what to say, Yuder remained silent, lips pressed firmly together. Observing this, a slightly bitter smile crossed Kishiar's face.

"But seeing your expression, it seems I've troubled your mind. Don't worry about remembering this conversation if it bothers you. Forget it. My overconcern might have led me to speak needlessly."

Upon hearing the words 'overconcern,' Yuder made up his mind.

Even if it seemed rational to speak about the dream only after uncovering something, by then Kishiar would have already suppressed his worries countless times. Despite seeing numerous times that Kishiar's outward indifference was not genuine, was he really going to rely again on his patience?

Of course, Kishiar would endure, no matter the pain. That was his forte.

Yet, that wasn't the right answer.

It made no sense for Yuder to be the one to repeatedly tell him not to hold back, only to force him into silence yet again. He didn't want to do that.

Yuder forced his unmoving lips to part, as if prying them open.

"No. Commander, you haven't worried excessively. You said what needed to be said. Please don't talk like that."

His voice, uncharacteristically strained, emerged with difficulty, carrying a faint tremble. Kishiar remained silent.

"..."

"The reason I couldn't speak about the dream was because in that night's vision, I saw the former Commander... or rather, his hand."

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"The reason I couldn't speak about the dream was because in that night's vision, I saw the former Commander... or rather, his hand."

The subject was the same person, yet simultaneously, it was not the same person.

Hence, Yuder's reference wavered momentarily, unable to find a clear foothold. He faintly realized the strangeness of it all, yet he had no choice. How could one precisely refer to someone who was the same yet not the same?

Before Kishiar's silent presence, Yuder realized that he must have already guessed the answer to the unspoken confession.

"...As expected, you had already anticipated this."

"That morning, as soon as you woke up and saw me while still half-asleep, you retreated away from me. Afterwards, you asked whether I felt anything while sleeping or had any strange dreams."

His calm voice flowed as if he had been prepared to give this answer from the start.

"So, naturally, I had to think the dream's content was related to me. I'm still uncertain why you specifically mentioned the hand, though."

Unintentionally, Yuder's gaze drifted towards Kishiar's hand, which was now bare, devoid even of the magic tool ring he usually wore. The hand he had grown so familiar with over time seemed strangely unfamiliar at this moment of dream confession.

The smooth back of his hand.

The protruding bones and blue tendons.

The fingertips imbued with the hue of ripe fruit and the almond-shaped nails.

All these were features Yuder had never seen in his previous life.

In his previous life, Kishiar had worn white gloves until his death, probably hiding the same gruesome scars that Yuder now concealed. What would that hand, bearing scars like those left by the Red Stone, have looked like?

It was now an impossible question to answer, too difficult even to imagine.

Yuder inhaled sharply and began to speak.

"It was exactly as I said. In the dream, only a hand appeared."

"Just a hand without the body?"

"Yes."

"Truly a nightmare, then. But that means the hand could have belonged to someone else, right?"

Instead of answering, Yuder looked at the man's face. His own gloomy reflection in those red eyes appeared like a corpse just emerged from a coffin, the face of a long-dead convict.

Yuder stared at that face and slowly, very slowly, began to speak. His voice, devoid of emotion, came out dry and brittle.

"That person always wore similar gloves. White leather gloves, almost identical in material to the ones I wear. And in the dream, the hand was wearing that glove."

The cold leather gloves, a sensation Yuder could never forget, always pressing down on his neck or shoulders. Despite his efforts to forget and his belief that he had, the touch was instantly recognizable, even in dreams.

Yuder continued, recalling the cool touch that had caressed him in the dream.

"Even if nothing else had appeared in the dream... I would have known whose hand it was."

Indeed, if the dream had shown someone else's hand, it wouldn't have felt like such a profound nightmare. It wouldn't have mattered whether they were the hands of those he had killed or the hands of Emperor Katchian. Even if those hands had appeared wielding a sword, he was certain he wouldn't have been frightened

.But it was unmistakably Kishiar's hand.

It was a hand that, no matter how much Yuder wished to mistake it for another, he simply could not.

The man, who had been scrutinizing Yuder's face, asked in a slightly lowered voice, yet with a hint of gentleness, "Did the hand merely exist there? Or was there contact?"

"It initiated contact," Yuder revealed, describing the encounter with the hand clad in white glove in the dream. He chose his words with extreme care, worried that the part about the hand caressing his face might sound peculiar.

But no matter how he explained it, the fact remained that the skin was touched. Therefore, it seemed best to hope that Kishiar, the listener, would perceive his words as objectively and devoid of emotion as possible.

"And then I..."

Articulating what followed was the most challenging part of all. After a long silence, Yuder finally mustered the courage to speak of the dream's enigmatic conclusion.

"...The moment I recognized whose hand it was, it responded to me."

"A response from just a hand?"

"It wrote the word 'correct' on my skin with its fingers. Then it grabbed my neck and pushed me down into the darkness... and when I opened my eyes, it was morning. That was the end."

After speaking, the dream seemed trivial. It was unbelievable that such a seemingly insignificant tale had taken so long to tell.

Yuder stood silently, waiting for Kishiar's response.

The rising sun behind the man cast a long shadow over Yuder, enveloping him in darkness. The backlighting hid Kishiar's expression from view.

A moment later, the man slowly raised his hand. Initially, it seemed as if he was examining his own hand, but that wasn't the case. He extended his hand forward and brushed Yuder's forehead. The fingertips, bearing a cool dampness, revealed the sweat on Yuder's forehead.

Only then did Yuder realize that his forehead was sweaty.

"A truly perplexing dream. Thank you for sharing it," Kishiar said, his lips moving in the dense backlight, his steady voice the only clear indication of his presence.

"But as of now, I have no significant guesses regarding that dream. Regrettably, it's beyond my understanding."

"..."

"May I ask you something, though?"

As Yuder nodded slowly, Kishiar, showing rare hesitation, cautiously inquired, "Did you feel, in the dream, that the hand intended to harm you?"

Did that hand intend to harm him?

Yuder reflected.

From the moment he felt the touch until he awoke, his skin had crawled continuously. It was a touch so surreal that it bordered on fear. But to say that the hand felt malicious or vengeful? That wasn't the case.

The hand neither clenched into a fist to strike Yuder, nor did it strangle him.

It simply caressed slowly, wrote a word with its finger, and then pushed him away.

Yuder felt a deep aversion but no distinct murderous intent. Even a hand without a mouth could convey that much.

After much contemplation, Yuder shook his head in conclusion.

"No. I don't think it was... intending harm. Perhaps."

"Is that so."

Was Kishiar's voice quivering slightly, or was it Yuder's imagination? Before Yuder could respond, Kishiar had already moved on to his next thought, leaving no opportunity to further discern his reaction.

"Just because we know nothing now does not mean we will remain ignorant forever. I will continue to seek out relevant information. By the time of Aton's next investigation, I will have much to share."

Yuder, with his head bowed, gazing at the ground, asked,

"Do you not think that I am merely overreacting to a nonsensical dream?"

"It's natural for anyone to react strongly to an ominous dream. Had I been in your place, my reaction might have been even more intense. Have you already forgotten how I recently spent sleepless nights borrowing all sorts of forbidden books? If anything, that's what should be called an overreaction. Though personally, I don't think of it as such."

Kishiar lightly laughed, turning his recent actions into a joke.

"Even if it's hard to explain, there's certainly something troubling you, hence your deep contemplation so far. It might seem difficult to articulate now, but once understood, it might return as a simple answer like the strange cracks or disasters you believed to be supernatural phenomena."

"..."

"If it turns out to be merely a simple dream, then that would be the best outcome."

Yuder lifted his head to look at Kishiar again. In the meantime, the sun had risen higher, diminishing the backlight, and Kishiar's expression became visible once more. Yuder had expected him to be smiling gently as usual, but he was not.

He looked sad.

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"My lord, you have returned."

In the hallway of the Southern branch of the Cavalry, under the high midday sun, Kishiar strode with a neat face betraying no hint of his overnight excursion outside. He nodded only towards Nathan Zuckerman, who approached to greet him.

"Yes, Nathan. Any changes in the meantime?"

"Since this morning, we have nearly completed the crackdown on the illegal fighting rings in Charloin. Of these, five establishments that were forcibly suppressing Awakeners were apprehended by the Charloin Security Force. All confiscated drugs were low-grade Calanesa, seemingly distributed by Southern merchants."

"Well done. And the reaction of the citizens?"

"Extremely positive. Calanesa was just beginning to spread through illegal rings, so halting that has been particularly well received. Thanks to the positive perception gained from the recent monster elimination, more people are actively assisting our enforcement efforts."

"It may be challenging to uproot the fighting ring culture entirely, but this is a good target for the Southern branch's future achievements."

As they conversed naturally while walking, many who passed by recognized Kishiar, bowing their heads in greeting. Yet, they could hardly catch the content of the conversation between the two.

This was to be expected. Among those who had reached the pinnacle of swordsmanship, mere lip movements without sound sufficed for communication. Kishiar often used this method to converse discreetly when outside.

Kishiar listened to Nathan Zuckerman's report with a quiet smile. Most of it was good news.

The public perception of the Cavalry had greatly improved, with Southern nobles who once ignored them now cautious. Particularly impactful was the public support from Myra El Herne of the prestigious Herne family, considered a spiritual pillar of the South. She had declared the Cavalry instrumental in capturing the murderer and accomplices of the Second Prince Ashrav.

Who was Myra? A precious child of the Herne family, born as a female for the first time after decades, beloved by many in the South. If she deemed the Cavalry trustworthy, people began to drop their prejudices.

The incident where Lord Jacob of Charloin failed to protect the young nobles, who had been VIPs at the Nukijo illegal fighting ring, further fueled the shift in opinion. Rumors even circulated that Duke Peletta's divine sword, radiating a divine aura, had nearly punished the Lord for his lies, causing him to flee in terror.

Consequently, doubts about Kishiar being a swordmaster ceased.

The rapid change in public opinion led the families of those young nobles to accept a humiliating sentence of three years of servitude and a hefty fine, a stark contrast to their previous arrogance.

Similarly, Duke Peletta and his assistant's interactions with officials, mages, and merchants whom they previously met on their first day in the South, had been fruitful.

The Cavalry had clearly demonstrated their intention not to blindly antagonize the existing powers in the South by that single act of cooperation. Those who had suspected the Emperor of using the Cavalry to purge them all were now reassured.

It was only a few days after the Cavalry had begun their work in earnest that the fighting arenas, which had been untouchable, started to disappear. Although monsters had appeared, no one was harmed, and the members of the Cavalry spent the whole day wandering around Charloin, assisting those in need and enforcing law and order.

During one of these patrols, this dawn, the fishmongers from a nearby fishing village recognized Kurga Sing, the son of a fisherman from a neighboring village, in Charloin.

They embraced Kurga warmly, welcoming him back like a son returning home in triumph, loudly proclaiming their recognition in their strong southern accent for all to hear. Kurga, embarrassed yet pleased, promised to treat them all to drinks.

Upon receiving this report from Nathan Zuckerman, Kishiar slowly nodded and spoke.

"It's a bit later than expected, but the timing couldn't have been better."

One of the conditions he had set for applicants when forming the Cavalry branch was that they had to be from the region.

The people of the Orr Empire, long resistant to change, had a strong sense of pride in their origins, especially those from the south, who were particularly averse to accepting help from outsiders, even in dire situations.

To them, merely revealing that the Cavalry members were not foreigners, but actually from the same region, greatly facilitated their activities. And such revelations were best spread naturally, rather than announced outright.

This event would likely lead to the delayed realization that most of the southern branch members of the Cavalry were locals.

'...This would then change the fundamental perception of those who had been treating the Cavalry as outsiders with suspicion and wariness.'

The tales of ordinary southern youths becoming Cavalry members, honored by the Emperor and returning home with titles of respect, would become endless sources of marvelous stories in taverns, streets, and alleys, big and small.

This meant a significant shift in perception for those who, until now, had felt the Cavalry to be an elusive and challenging entity, aiding them in viewing Awakeners more positively.

Becoming an Awakener meant one could join the Cavalry.

Joining the Cavalry meant the possibility of social ascension and success.

Even those who were not Awakeners could potentially become one, showing that they were not much different from us.

This simple formula could bring about how much change in those who had been stuck in a stagnant social hierarchy, content with their realities. The nobles, ignorant of change, might not yet fully grasp or wish to acknowledge this reality, but Kishiar was different.

He was well aware, more than anyone, of the significant shifts in consciousness that had already taken place in the capital, where the Cavalry headquarters was located, and where it was easier to encounter Awakeners. Now, it was time to spread this change nationwide through the establishment of branches.

Lost in thought, Kishiar suddenly noticed something outside the window that captured his attention. Yuder Aile was walking briskly outside the branch. This was the first time he had seen him since they parted ways this morning.

Despite it being just a few hours ago, Kishiar couldn't take his eyes off his black hair. As his Lord stopped, Nathan Zuckerman naturally stopped as well.

The adjutant, attuned to his Lord's wishes, did not question Kishiar's silent gaze out the window. He knew exactly who Kishiar was watching.

Whenever Kishiar behaved out of the ordinary, it invariably involved Yuder Aile. It was unclear how he managed to do it, but Kishiar possessed an uncanny ability to spot his beloved and cherished assistant, Yuder, no matter how far away, as if he had a sixth sense for it.

Moments after Yuder had completely vanished from view, Kishiar finally spoke.

"Nathan. Contact the Lord of Mclara and arrange a meeting. However, let the purpose be officially about Duke Peletta's 'investment' in Mclara."

"Is that the area you inspected yesterday?"

"Yes, it was one of them."

Kishiar then mentioned the names of other areas he and Yuder had toured, issuing several commands. The purpose was to closely monitor the trends in those areas and ensure they could secure a route for movement at any time. These were also steps that Yuder had mentioned the night before as the first phase of disaster response.

Considering the current situation, these actions might seem unnecessary and somewhat puzzling, but Nathan Zuckerman bowed his head without opposing his Lord's wishes.

"I understand. I shall follow your orders."

Expecting Kishiar to dismiss him, Nathan was surprised when Kishiar remained silent even after receiving his response. Quietly, Nathan continued to follow the silent figure walking down the corridor.

After a while, when they reached a corridor utterly devoid of anyone else's presence, Kishiar spoke up.

"Nathan."

"Yes, my Lord."

"What do you think happens to the dead?"

Even Nathan Zuckerman, who had been conditioned by countless peculiar questions from his Lord, found it unusually challenging to answer this one.

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Where do the dead go? What could the meaning behind such a question be? The knight from the soYudern lands, having been silent, finally spoke with a heavy voice, "In the temples, they say one goes to heaven or hell, don't they?"

According to the doctrine of the Sun God, it is believed that after death, based on divine judgment, one either goes to heaven, where angels dwell, or hell, the realm of demons. However, eternity is not spent there; once all deeds are accounted for, one is embraced by the Sun God, becoming eternally a part of the burning flame.

Kishiar would know this, yet for some unknown reason he asked.

"So, by mentioning the temple, you imply that this differs from your personal beliefs, Nathan?"

"As you know, I have little interest in tales of gods or the like. To me, death is the end. I care not for what follows."

Nathan, born to desert warriors but raised in the empire north of the sands, always maintained a distance from such beliefs. To him, the people and the master before him were far more significant than any deity. He didn't wish to waste the living moments for the sake of the afterlife.

His knowledge of such matters stemmed solely from following the master, an imperial family member, to numerous temples in his youth, nothing more, nothing less.

"Interesting. Do the people of the south hold a different view on this?"

"In the faith of the SoYuderners... I've heard that when one dies, they become a star in the sky. Beyond that, I'm not certain," he replied, recalling tales told by his parents in childhood, unsure if they truly become stars.

"So, either embraced by the sun or becoming a star... What then, do you think of the existence of ghosts?"

This third question compelled Nathan to reveal his doubts to his master.

"It seems to me that these are questions better suited for priests, not for me. Is there a reason you ask?"

“Just that I've never deeply pondered the afterlife, but now it seems I might need to explore these matters. I was curious about others' views, and you, being my subordinate, were the first I thought to ask.”

“...You've come to inquire about the afterlife?”

“Sharp hearing, yet you question me again.”

Despite knowing why Nathan had asked, the master seemed disinclined to explain. Nathan remained silent for a long time, his extensive experience usually preventing any disconcert. His prolonged silence indicated the profound seriousness he found in this question.

Unconcerned with his subordinate's reaction, Kishiar urged for an answer, “So, your response?”

“...Having never seen a ghost with my own eyes, I do not believe in them. Any claim to the contrary would be a delusion or madness.”

Hearing this blunt response, Kishiar's lips curled into a faint smile.

“I see. As expected. Very well, you may go.”

“...”

As Kishiar waved his hand dismissively and turned away, Nathan gazed at his retreating figure, deep in thought. He had a strong suspicion that his master's unusual behavior was somehow connected to the broader intrigues of Yuder Aile.

If the absurd question truly held significant importance for the master, Nathan, as his adjutant, felt compelled to gather any information he could to assist.

'Regarding the afterlife,' he mused, recalling days long past spent with his parents. A recent visit to the village of his youth had sharpened these memories.

Among these, he spoke of a recollection that suddenly flitted through his mind. "Now that I think about it, there was an elderly Southerner in our village who spoke about what happens after death.

He said that not everyone becomes a complete star when they die; parts of life get filtered out like dregs, forming the darkness of the night."

Kishiar, who had been walking, stopped and turned his head. Nathan Zuckerman noticed that his story had struck a chord with the master.

"Dregs that get filtered out..."

"It seems to be the Southern version of the idea that those who do wrong are barred from heaven."

"No, it's rather similar to something else."

"Pardon?"

"Consider this: isn't there a similar notion here too? That after fulfilling their deeds in heaven and hell, souls are embraced by the Sun God to burn eternally. However, there are deeds that, no matter how much time passes, cannot be erased. Whether good or bad, the unerased signifies remnants, dregs."

Kishiar, deep in thought and stroking his chin, uttered in a somber tone, "...But our side doesn't elaborate on what happens to these remnants. Only that they cannot return to nothingness, only mentioning becoming part of the eternal flame of the Sun God."

"I see."

"Deeds that can't return to nothing. Remnants buried in darkness..."

In the ensuing silence, Kishiar was lost in thought. His red eyes, visible beneath his lowered eyelashes, held a deeper contemplation than ever before. Nathan Zuckerman waited quietly for his master to gather his thoughts.

The response that came was once again unexpected.

"Even the remnants left after burning were once part of a whole. Then, is it meaningful to speculate and judge based on just those remnants?"

This seemed more of a rhetorical question than a direct inquiry to Nathan, as Kishiar's gaze was fixated on the unknown void.

"If we must ponder... it wouldn't hurt, I suppose."

Kishiar looked up at Nathan Zuckerman.

"Is that so?"

"People say not to judge a person by a part of them, but that part does indeed speak about the person. That is my view."

Kishiar nodded slightly, his gaze once again drifting out the window. There, unchanged, was Yuder Aile.

Dressed in a dark uniform, the pale man was surrounded by people from various groups, all fervently speaking to him. Despite the chaos, Yuder, with an unflustered, expressionless face, addressed and resolved each person's concerns in turn.

At a glance, he seemed like someone who had been doing such work for decades, but in reality, he was only in his early twenties, in his first year with the Cavalry. Yet, no one around him seemed to acknowledge this fact.

Anyone in his presence soon realizes that his words are mostly correct, even if the advice is unpleasant. They accept it as if it were from a superior. This was the peculiar aura that Yuder possessed, a strange influence that made others agree with him.

As Nathan observed the scene, Kishiar spoke up.

"Nathan, can you look into that part you mentioned earlier in more detail?"

"Do you mean the tale about the remnants that failed to become stars? If it's needed, I shall do so."

"Thank you. I realize it must have seemed like a strange question."

Instead of replying, Nathan let out a small sigh, directing it towards the hand of his master patting his shoulder.

"It's far easier than when you proposed creating a bestiary and map for the monsters around Peletta."

That was his attempt at a joke, and Kishiar, recalling that time, smiled.

"That was necessary for everyone, but this is solely for me. So, it need not take precedence over other tasks. I entrust it to you, Nathan."

"Yes."

With a nod, Nathan Zuckerman left. Kishiar stood still, gazing down at his own hands.

'I said it couldn't be speculated with the knowledge I had, but in truth, emotions could lead to conjecture. Especially if it were a part of me.'

Chapter 776

With a nod, Nathan Zuckerman left. Kishiar stood still, gazing down at his own hands.

'I said it couldn't be speculated with the knowledge I had, but in truth, emotions could lead to conjecture. Especially if it were a part of me.'

Yuder's recent nightmare was significantly different from his previous dreams. It was neither a reenactment of scenarios from the 'previous game' nor shared with Kishiar.

The most notable difference was that, despite this, Kishiar La Orr from the previous game, or more precisely, his hand, made an appearance.

Yuder's reaction alone was enough to confirm with certainty that this was a first-time occurrence, even if he had never dreamt something like this before.

Therefore, Yuder felt, and Kishiar also thought, that this dream was not an ordinary one. The mere appearance of the hand and the actions it took in the dream were all notably unusual.

Yuder mentioned that the hand had caressed him.

He tried to explain as calmly as possible, suppressing his emerging emotions, but the look in his eyes while speaking was far from usual. It was cold, detached, and empty, like someone who had reopened an old, deep scar.

Yet, within those eyes, there was a faint confusion, guilt, and a tiny spark of something he would probably never admit to having.

It was a spark all too familiar to Kishiar. He had seen Yuder nurture and grow it into a blazing flame more than anyone else.

Just the night before, under Kishiar's touch, Yuder had fanned that flame countless times. The pure flames of passion that arose in his pitch-black eyes were so mesmerizing that they threatened to consume Kishiar in their intensity.

Knowing this, Kishiar could guess what Yuder might have recalled when he was touched in the dream.

Yuder didn't explicitly talk about his past life relationship, but there are things in this world that can't be described dryly, especially physical aspects.

Kishiar had deduced these things from the slight clues Yuder inadvertently dropped and the sequence in which the dream hand had touched Yuder. He had predicted much of this from Yuder's words and behavior, as well as the fleeting moments of past lives he saw in his dreams, but it had never felt as vivid as now.

The reason was simple. For Yuder, those were just memories of a past long gone, but not this time.

"Cheek, lips, then the chin. Finally... the neck."

Kishiar raised his hand, slowly moving it through the air as if tracing something.

It was the same path described by Yuder when he spoke of the dream hand's caress.

Kishiar gazed at his hand, paused at the height of Yuder's neck, and then closed his eyes.

He imagined an unfortunate man who had just regained his strength, future, and precious family, only to realize that he had lost everything again.

He wore gloves daily, much like the current Yuder, perhaps because the man from that time had endured similar or identical experiences. Yuder, who possessed only the power of the Awakener and was confident in his unique skills, had faced the raw power of the Red Stone head-on and used it as an opportunity for self-improvement. But what about himself?

Kishiar easily imagined the worst-case scenario he would face if he were in such a situation, considering the condition of his body when he went on the mission to retrieve the Red Stone.

‘The balance of the body is completely broken by the rampage of the Awakener power. The worst scenario unfolds when one can no longer maintain the barely-held-together vessel.’

If such a situation were to arise, the outcome would be as clear as day. However, Kishiar focused on conjecturing what actions he himself would have taken.

‘If it were me.’

If it were him, he would have first sought a way to survive. The thought of losing the hope he had just grasped was unbearable and not something he could easily give up on. For that, he would have devoted all his time and resources. Even the ambitious Cavalry he had started and the enemies who had long awaited their turn would have been ignored in such a predicament.

But if, in the end, he found no solution and was certain that no new opportunities would come his way,

Then, perhaps,

‘He would have prepared for what comes after death.’

Dying without achieving his desired goals would have been regrettable, but in some ways, it might have been for the better. It's a possibility one must always consider, something he had mentally prepared for since childhood.

Since the vessel began to crack, he had spent much time bedridden. Lying there, he read about numerous historical figures of power and idealists who dreamt of it, all falling and being stranded by unforeseeable tempests in life.

Had they succeeded, history might have drastically changed. Great figures who couldn't even glimpse the threshold of their goals died in vain, and the ambitious, after enduring hardships to achieve everything, saw their accomplishments crumble to dust and disappear without a trace the moment they died. Such is life, and one's ideals are no exception.

Emperor Keilusa once spoke similar words after losing the heir he cherished and damaging his vessel.

"Kishiar. I thought myself a man of considerable restraint, but today's incomprehensible tragedy reveals how baselessly I believed that fate would ultimately smile upon me. To think that my only recourse is to curse the heavens, I do not even deserve to be a father to that child."

Kishiar had harbored similar thoughts since his early years. His conclusion then was that until death, it's not truly over, so he should enjoy life and live it to the fullest.

But could he have maintained such thoughts after being deprived of a second chance? Kishiar doubted it. Knowing the joy, success, fulfillment, and exhilaration brought by his current endeavors, he could hardly fathom the despair of them falling apart.

If he had never tasted hope, perhaps it would be different, but to vomit out the hope once savored seemed an unbearable task.

However, the death of Kishiar La Orr is not a solitary end. Before him stands an emperor on the brink of an uncertain death, an empress who pinned all her hopes on him, and loyal subjects, including a devoted assistant and knights united under the banner of Peletta.

For a peaceful death, he needed to consider those he would leave behind. In this process, there was no room for anything else to intervene.

So, ordinarily, that's what would have happened.

In a situation where the end was foreseen, it seemed unlikely to afford attention to anything new, yet in the previous game, it appears such an event had indeed occurred.

Kishiar remembered the eyes of the shabby, visibly ill man he had secretly observed from behind Yuder's dream. The man's gaze, watching the young and inexperienced Yuder, who appeared to be his real age, clumsily swinging a sword he had only recently acquired, had a hint of joy. He had attended the successor's inauguration ceremony, a place he needn't have bothered with, and hidden in the shadows, he watched as the successor donned the attire he had prepared and followed in his footsteps. Kishiar, with eyes devoid of any warmth, observed the man's foolish, feigned smile as he playfully pressed his lips to the back of his successor's hand.

Being himself, Kishiar was keenly aware of how absurd it all was.

Even appearing as nothing more than a hand and ultimately only managing to caress Yuder.

Yuder seemed unaware as he spoke, but Kishiar knew. The way the hand in the dream stroked him, the order, the method, except for the neck, were almost identical to how he usually tenderly touched Yuder when engulfed in affectionate feelings.

If the other person was devoid of emotion, merely a transient acquaintance from a troubled past, one would never touch him in such a manner.

These were feelings only Kishiar La Orr could perceive, and they bombarded his mind like a torrential downpour as he listened to the story.

An indescribable, instinctive certainty.

But how could he possibly convey this to Yuder?

Kishiar lowered his hand and opened his eyes. The fleeting look of pain had long since vanished.

He clenched his fist and nonchalantly left the place, moving on with his steps.

Chapter 777

In a hidden village nestled between deserts seldom trodden, lay the southern base of the Star of Nagran—a sanctuary for the Awakeners who fled the pains of the outer world. Once a haven, it had transformed into a desolate shadow of its former self, its streets now eerily silent, devoid of human warmth.

Into this forsaken village, shrouded in tattered rags, stumbled a figure. Despite the cloak masking his visage, it was clear that this man could not properly use one of his arms and was limping. Ominously, following the sound of dragging, there was a strong smell of blood and pus.

Leaning wearily against his dulled blade, an Awakener grimaced, about to question the stranger, when the man unveiled his face. Half marred by grotesque burn scars, the other half strikingly handsome—a visage of stark contrast. Recognizing him, the Awakener cried out in shock, “Nahan!”

This was the man who left to seek the sage. But Nahan's return was shadowed by change. His face, more haggard than before, eyes drowned in unspoken darkness. Despite being on friendly terms with Nahan, the Awakener, who had unwittingly turned pale, cautiously opened his mouth.

“What happened to you? What of the brethren who left with you?” he asked, trepidation lacing his voice.

“...”

“Don’t tell me... you didn’t meet the sage, did you?”

Staring blankly at the Awakener’s incredulous face, Nahan finally opened his mouth to answer.

“I met him.”

“You did? Then why return in such a state?” Confusion evident in his tone.

At those words, a twisted smile briefly crossed Nahan's lips. “The sage will not honor our agreement. Nor will I any longer.”

“What do you mean the sage won't honor the agreement?” Their disbelief was palpable.

Ignoring the question, Nahan strode into the village. In the past, as soon as he entered, the villagers would all flock to him and create a commotion, now, only silence greeted him. Even the few people who could be seen did not approach Nahan immediately, but only sent a wary look from a distance.

Seeing this, Nahan, who was being followed by the Awakener, asked.

“What's happened here? Why is it so deserted? Where is Sera? No matter how much she dislikes me, she wouldn't empty the village without thinking.”

“Ah, that's... sigh. You don't know how bad the atmosphere was here after you left...”

The Awakener began to speak with a resentful face, as if burdened by a long-kept secret. He recounted the escalating tensions between Nahan's followers and the sage's, the ensuing exodus of ordinary Awakeners, the southern merchants who had quietly infiltrated the southern outpost in the midst of this, and Sera's betrayal—joining hands with them under the guise of no contact from the sage.

Nahan learned that Sera, having received a request from the sage, had left for Charloin with her followers and had not returned since. A heavy silence fell upon Nahan as he absorbed this news.

“The atmosphere here is dire. Even the sick are left untreated. Remember Meto? The monster-taming child you brought from the east?”

Nahan's response was but a heavy silence, mirroring the weight of his thoughts.

“After the sage departed, his condition had been deteriorating continuously. Perhaps it was because Daemon had borrowed his powers... Sigh. It seems like we can't question or speak to Daemon until he returns, but since he's not here, there's no way to know. I'm actually worried he might truly die.”

Though Nahan tried to lighten the mood by bringing up this topic, it only made the atmosphere colder. In a silence so deep it seemed to lower the temperature, the Awakener shivered involuntarily. Suddenly, Nahan clenched his teeth and pressed a hand to his own forehead, a groan of pain escaping from his staggering body.

"Ugh..."

"Nahan?!"

"Don't touch me..."

Nahan, avoiding the Awakener's attempt to support him, wrapped his head in his hands and groaned for a long time. It was a terrible sound, like the growling of a bound beast.

After stumbling around and rolling on the ground in agony, he finally managed to stand properly on his own. Panting, he returned to his previous state, and the Awakener realized that this wasn't the first time Nahan had experienced this.

"Your arm doesn't look good either. Are you... really okay? If it's a disease or something..."

Startled by the sight of Nahan's bloodshot eyes, the Awakener gasped in shock. Even being on the same side, Nahan's fearsome appearance made him unapproachable.

Had something happened to make him this way? He never used to be like this.

Despite the Awakener's obvious fear, Nahan's expression remained unchanged. He spoke in a low, hoarse voice, "I've had headaches before, but they started getting worse after I met the sage this time."

"Really?"

"It's not bad, though. Every time this pain ends, my mind clears, and I continue to realize something."

The Awakener couldn't comprehend what he meant and simply cocked his head, but Nahan didn't elaborate. Instead, he gave an order.

"Gather all the brothers and sisters in this village who share our purpose."

"I can gather them, but there are hardly any... What are you going to do?"

"We must do what we originally intended."

This statement was significant. The Awakener, who had always agreed with Nahan's ideology, was pleased that Nahan remained steadfast even in this state, but also worried.

The old Nahan was never this precarious. He used to joke around, and his innate coldness felt charming as a leader. Most importantly, back then, the gentle and kind Hosanna was always by his side.

Hosanna was not only helpful but also kind to everyone, not just Nahan. There were many missing colleagues at the time, and although they didn't say it, it was shocking for everyone when he was caught by the Cavalry in the west and killed.

The Awakener realized anew how difficult it was to approach Nahan without Hosanna.

"You met the sage and just came back. Is that okay? When are the others coming? We don't have enough people here."

"The brothers and sisters who went with me might not be able to return. Something unexpected happened while meeting the sage."

Muttering the sage's name, Nahan's gaze suddenly turned icy cold.

"An unexpected event?"

"While coming here, I made sure to contact the brethren at the central base, so they should be arriving soon. And..."

He opened his mouth slowly, ensuring that each word was clear for the awaiting Awakener to hear.

"Make sure everyone gets the message. The name, 'The Star of Nagran,' has appeared on the list of collaborators with the Cavalry."

"What?"

"It wasn't my doing. So, who could it be?"

The Awakener's expression momentarily became blank. It was due to the collision between the logical conclusion and the long-ingrained brainwashing. As the words passed through his ears, they brought a sensation sharp as thorns, provoking a sudden, intense headache.

"Ah... Uh...? What... are you talking about? Nahan, I just... The Star of Nagran, what?"

"I have no intention of going with those who have joined hands with power. We will set out to find the world of the Awakeners on our own."

Nahan declared this, looking at the pained Awakener.

"It would be nice if the one who betrayed us came to find us before that."

—

Exactly four days after Kishiar sent a letter to the Cavalry headquarters authorizing the use of Hosanna's powers to travel south, a group of unfamiliar shadows appeared in front of the Cavalry's southern branch.

"Commander! We have arrived!"

The sight of their colleagues from the capital surprised all the members guarding the southern branch.

"When did you get here? We didn't hear any news of your arrival...!"

"What's happening! How did you get here so quickly?"

"Happy to see you all, but let's save the talk for later. Where is the Commander?"

Amidst the slightly tired but smiling members from the capital, a tall woman stepped forward to ask. It was Ever, with her long brown hair tightly tied up.

"Happy to see you all, but let's save the talk for later. Where is the Commander?"

Amidst the slightly tired but smiling members from the capital, a tall woman stepped forward to ask. It was Ever, with her long brown hair tightly tied up.

"Hmm... The Commander is probably in the temporary office, having finished the morning's schedule."

Ever learned the location of Kishiar's temporary office from the members of the southern branch. After expressing her thanks, she strode ahead, followed by a procession of those from the capital, a sight to behold.

"Who are those people? They're reinforcements from the capital?"

The southern passersby and the imperial army, hearing belatedly of the support from the capital, watched from afar and whispered excitedly.

To their eyes, the newly arrived Cavalry members appeared exceptionally disciplined and impressive. However, not everyone fit this description.

"How splendid... But who are those following behind?"

An elderly woman, seemingly too old for such a journey, and a chubby-faced young mage struggling with a large cart of luggage, including the old woman's.

Trailing them was a young man with ashen hair and a face full of discontent, kicking at the ground as if angry, followed by a young priest offering words of comfort with a smile.

Beside the priest walked a petite woman with striking golden-brown bobbed hair and, in contrast, a tall, red-haired man of remarkable beauty. They were both protectively surrounding someone completely covered in robes from head to toe.

The bobbed-haired woman and red-haired man, clad in Cavalry uniforms, walked at the very end of the line, their detachment from the others piquing the curiosity of onlookers.

The people, sending curious glances, were startled when the ashen-haired man suddenly turned his head, catching their gaze.

"What are you looking at?"

"Ah..."

Startled by his fierce tone, the onlookers turned away like a herd of herbivores encountering a predator. The disgruntled man then suddenly raised an eyebrow and gestured towards someone.

"Hey, you with the antlers."

"Me, me?"

The one he pointed to was Elpkins, who had hurried to see the newly arrived Cavalry members from the capital. He was startled by the man's sudden attention.

"Yes, you. What's with that look?"

"He didn't mean any harm, just... curious... Sorry if he offended you... Sorry!"

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

Elpkins found the frowning man's handsome face intimidating, nearly bringing him to tears, when the priest intervened.

"Sir Enon, please. Your words can be frightening. The gentleman looks unwell. What happened to him?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"When?"

"Just now."

"No, you didn't. Look at his face. He didn't understand. We might be used to your way of speaking, Sir Enon, but it's hard for newcomers. Ask Kanna and Gakane who's right..."

"Fine, fine. The kid thinks she's grown enough to lecture me."

What seemed like a helping hand was not so. The young priest, though appearing kind, was verbose. Meanwhile, Elpkins and the others around him lowered their heads, diminishing their presence, and dispersed.

Elpkins, conspicuous with his wings and horns, could not bear to make himself more noticeable. He swallowed his plea for them to just leave him alone, tears welling up inside, and merely grumbled to himself.

That was when his savior appeared.

"...Enon?"

"Sir Yuder!"

"Yuder!"

From behind Elpkins, a savior emerged. The resplendent savior who had saved his life before appeared again today, immaculately dressed, with a pale face that never showed a drop of sweat.

He immediately grasped the situation, seeing Elpkins, bewildered and on the verge of tears, and clicked his tongue sharply.

"Rest first before you start working. Don't just jump into tasks."

"I was going to, but look at him. What's with him? Why does he look so beaten? Did you pick him up from somewhere, after he nearly died ten times?"

Hearing this, Yuder turned to Elpkins and after a moment of silence, spoke.

"Almost. He's one of the Awakeners who escaped from an illegal fighting ring. He applied for and passed the second phase of our Cavalry recruitment."

Elpkins, unable to fully comprehend their words, was confused. He felt fine, having received a lot of divine power since escaping the fighting ring, and couldn't understand why they thought he was in bad shape. He timidly raised his hand.

"Um, I'm not hurt at all... Can't I just go...?"

"I knew it!"

His timid voice, about to ask if he could leave, was instantly shattered by Enon's exclamation. Enon looked at Elpkins with disdain, clicking his tongue.

"When I came in, I saw plenty like him, but he's the worst of them all! We're in trouble now!"

"Me, sir...?"

"Is he treatable?"

Ignoring Elpkins, Yuder asked.

"It'll take time, but it's not impossible. Anyone you bring is better than you. Why call me from outside the capital when I told you not to? You keep bringing in such cases...!"

"It's not just for that."

"What! What else are you planning!"

The scary handsome man was merciless even towards Elpkins' savior. Elpkins gasped as he watched Enon stretch Yuder's cheek. It was a shocking sight for him, though Yuder's expression remained unchanged.

"Gulp..."

"You'll see that often, so it's better to get used to it."

Then, someone patted his back from behind. It was a woman with bobbed hair. Her bright green eyes seemed cheerful and innocent, yet piercing, making Elpkins slightly shrink back.

"Don't be scared. They're not bad people. That's Enon, the sole official pharmacist of the Cavalry, and that priest is Lusan, the only one in the medical unit. The redhead is Gakane Bolunwald from the Shin Division, and I am Kanna Wand, the Deputy Commander of the Jung Division. Knowing who they are makes it less scary, right?"

The identity of the person caught in the middle, covered from head to toe in a robe, was cleverly kept secret, but Elpkins had no intention of paying attention to that.

"Uh... Ah... Yes..."

"And you, escaping from an illegal fighting ring and then immediately joining the second batch of recruitment, that's impressive. Yuder recognizing your skills means we can expect great things from you!"

Confused, Elpkins couldn't recall any mention of Yuder praising his abilities. Yet, he naively nodded in agreement.

"Yes, I was fortunate. Thank you..."

"It wasn't just luck. You had the fate and skill to achieve such a good outcome."

The one who spoke was Gakane, who stood silently beside Kanna. Elpkins, intimidated by his striking appearance, which differed markedly from Enon's, felt a surge of emotion upon seeing his benevolent smile.

"Is that so...?"

"Yes. Enon's current behavior is merely out of concern for your physical condition, wanting to heal you. So, don't be afraid, you can comfortably return. You may think you are fully recovered, but Enon has a keen eye for identifying those in need of treatment."

Kanna, with a secretive smile, shared this as a little secret among the Cavalry members, calling it Enon's 'Magical Eyes.' Even in his bewildered state, Elpkins managed a clumsy smile in response.

"Ha ha..."

"Anyway, don't worry. If needed, Enon will call for you later."

"I see... Thank you! Then, I'll take my leave now."

Elpkins turned and left them behind. Fortunately, no one called out to stop him. Glancing back midway, he saw Kanna comfortably embracing Yuder and linking arms with Gakane, while Enon stood watching them, arms crossed and a sulky expression on his face.

Truthfully, Elpkins had no idea why the Commander had insisted on bringing them from the capital, nor what plans lay ahead, but seeing them, he felt as if he understood something.

Yuder's expression was entirely different when he was with others from the south. He was always thought to be indistinguishable due to his constant, similar expressionlessness, but that was not the case.

Even for someone as formidable as Yuder, a divine messenger of war, 'support' was clearly necessary. That must be why these people were here.

Just watching them filled Elpkins with a sense of reassurance. He left the place more swiftly and with lighter steps than before.

It was a morning event on the first day the Cavalry members descended from the capital to Charloin in the south.

"All of you have worked hard to get here," said Kishiar, as everyone who had come from the capital finally gathered in one place. This assembly was no small event, as it included most of the key figures currently composing the Cavalry.

Looking over those gathered, Kishiar, with his usual leisurely smile, said, "I'm glad to see everyone in good health. We used a somewhat 'special' method of travel this time. Were there any unusual occurrences during the journey?"

The 'special' method of travel, of course, referred to the power of Hosanna. Realizing this, Ever, acting as their representative, responded, "Yes, everything went smoothly. The final destination, arranged by you, was within a reasonable range of deviation, allowing us to safely meet the guide."

Kishiar had shared the news of their arrival with only a handful of people in the capital and had selected a location where a sudden appearance of many wouldn't attract attention.

At that spot, only Nathan Zuckerman, pre-instructed, was waiting. Not being a member of the Cavalry, his presence didn't draw the attention of other powers within Charloin, making him an ideal guide. Without him, it would have been impossible to swiftly identify and safely lead the members who landed a bit further than planned to the southern branch.

"It's good to hear. Having experienced this special mode of travel, I assume you have some thoughts to share compared to the previous methods?" Kishiar asked.

"To be honest... it was truly an incredible ability, beyond imagination," answered Ever, seriously.

"Transporting so many people instantly, and then recovering in just a few hours. According to Hosanna, he used to transport even larger groups over longer distances and still be fine. I believe his teleportation ability is unmatched by any existing means."

Hosanna had regained his powers miraculously after hearing the news about Nahan. Though not fully recovered, his ability to teleport was limited to shorter distances, yet the Cavalry managed to travel from the capital to the south in just four days.

The four days were mostly due to Hosanna needing breaks to endure the aftereffects, with the actual travel time being less than half a day. As Ever said, it was an unrivaled ability in terms of transportation.

"Moreover, it seems his power was recovering over the journey, as the recovery time shortened significantly by the last teleportation. Initially, he had to be carried after using his power, but by the time we reached the southern branch, he was walking on his own. Though we put him with Mage Alik's suppression device and kept his face hidden, we still need to be cautious to prevent his escape," Ever added.

"What does Deputy Commander Kanna think about Deputy Commander Ever's concerns?" Kishiar inquired, turning his attention to Kanna, who had been listening quietly.

Kanna, entrusted with escorting Hosanna along with Gakane due to her ability to sense any intention of escape, replied, "When we arrived in the south, I didn't sense any intention other than nervousness from Hosanna."

She continued, somewhat tensely, "For now, his biggest emotions seem to be concern for Nahan and skepticism towards the sage. But as Deputy Commanders Ever said, we shouldn't let our guard down. His thoughts might change once he meets the other Awakeners from the Stars of Nagran, given his fragile mindset."

"Skepticism towards the sage, that's an interesting development. Does it seem he's become aware of his own brainwashing?"

"Ever since he heard about the confrontation between Nahan and the sage, his attitude when speaking about the sage has been changing," Kanna reported. According to her, Hosanna had recently stopped speaking positively about the sage. Following any negative remarks about the sage, he often complained of headaches and other pains. These symptoms were much milder than when directly questioned by Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman, but they were frequent nonetheless.

Kanna initially thought these symptoms were due to his recovering powers, but as they persisted even after his powers had somewhat returned, she started to believe they were more likely the aftereffects of his brainwashing breaking down. "But it could be both," she added.

"It seems there is indeed a change. Then, entering the underground area where the Awakeners' powers are limited could intensify this change," mused Kishiar.

"Ah, are you referring to the area that limits the Awakeners' abilities, which I've only heard about?"

"Yes, the very place that has greatly relieved us from surveillance duties," Kishiar responded, prompting a collective chuckle from the group. Yuder, who had been sitting quietly by Kishiar and observing the meeting, sensed the difficulties hidden in their laughter.

The Cavalry members had spent a significant amount of effort surveilling the captured Awakeners. As the number of subjects to watch grew, their ability to perform their regular duties and training diminished. Despite the inconvenience, it was a necessary task.

The suppression device developed by Alik was still under research and not yet ready for widespread use. The solution found in the south had been a great relief to them.

"Thanks to the exceptional Awakener, Reneve, our efforts have been significantly reduced. Be sure to express your gratitude when you meet her."

"It's truly fascinating to think that such an ability exists. The south seems to be home to some remarkable Awakeners," Kanna remarked, her eyes lighting up with excitement, despite being a rare Awakener herself.

"Perhaps showing this space to Mage Alik could aid in the development of the suppression device. Although, I suspect you already plan to do that, Commander," she added, seemingly realizing how meticulously their Commander planned.

Without embarrassing her, Kishiar smiled and praised her insight. "Indeed, I intend to have him there, but it's reassuring to have a Deputy Commanders who understands my intentions. Since we're on the topic, would you accompany Alik when he visits the area?"

"Certainly! It's an honor to serve the new master of the divine sword, the one who has shown the ultimate skill in swordsmanship!" Kanna responded enthusiastically, brightening the mood of the meeting. Kishiar, feigning surprise, chuckled softly.

"Is that flattery?"

"No flattery, Commander, just the truth. Even we, the Deputy Commanders, have never seen you unleash your aura. Hearing that others have witnessed it made us initially envious. But now, I'm just glad to belatedly celebrate your achievement! I've wanted to say this from the beginning."

Kanna's words implied that, though the members were surprised to learn of his status as a Swordmaster, they had no doubt about his capabilities and trusted him implicitly. None of the members showed any negativity towards the fact that Kishiar had hidden his power from them all this time. The question of why he concealed such extraordinary abilities was similarly received without any sign of dissent.

A relaxed atmosphere around the Commander didn't mean that one could behave too familiarly with him. The members naturally maintained a respectful distance, understanding that if he chose not to speak of something, there must be a good reason for it.

This environment – gentle yet disciplined, where everyone knew what to respect and maintain – was the ideal embodiment of the Cavalry as Kishiar had shaped it.

"Hmm, it seems direct praise really does have its own flavor," Kishiar remarked with a blatantly cheeky grin. Encouraged by this, Kanna and the other members, as if they couldn't contain themselves, began to speak up one by one.

"What exactly did you do with your aura back then? I can't quite picture it from the stories."

"Is it possible for you to combine your aura with the power of an Awakener?"

"Ah, I wish I had been there in the south to fight alongside..."

Their voices, a mix of genuine admiration and pride for their Commander, soon grew louder, resembling excited children.

Among them was Gakane, whose face flushed at the mention of swords.

"If there's a chance, we would love to witness your swordsmanship, Commander!"

"Ha ha, alright, I understand. I'll show you this evening, so calm down."

"Really? You promise!"

With a wave of his hand, Kishiar calmed the excited members and smoothly changed the topic.

"But before that, we have tasks to attend to. I'll inform you about the current situation in the south and what we need to do. Pay attention, and remember, nothing said here should be accidentally leaked to the outside."

The previously relaxed atmosphere instantly tightened up. Everyone straightened their postures, alert and eager not to miss a single word from Kishiar.

Yuder, already familiar with much of this information through direct experience and his own inputs, didn't need to focus as intensely. He observed his colleagues, visibly tense yet confident, and then turned his gaze to Kishiar, who continued his explanations and instructions without any hesitation.

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Even after hearing about Yuder's dream, Kishiar hadn't changed much. It wasn't so much about hiding his feelings or deliberately not speaking. Rather, it felt like he was waiting for the time to pass, following the decision he had made, until he could be more certain.

And, in fact, Yuder felt the same way.

'It can't be helped. For now, there's just too little information about the nature of that dream. It's not something that can be understood with mere effort, so waiting is the best we can do right now.'

Knowing that they were both concerned about each other, they tried not to repeat the mistakes of the past. All that remained was to wait for more information to gather without hiding their feelings and attitudes.

It was a wait without promise, but strangely, this fact no longer felt overly stifling or anxious. Yuder thought it might be because he had shared the dream story with Kishiar.

Talking about it didn't solve anything. But sometimes, the mere act of doing something gives it meaning.

Kishiar's unchanging calmness after learning about the dream, and the way he looked at him with sometimes deeper eyes, or touched him gently without avoiding his gaze, gave such meaning to Yuder.

‘The last expression I saw in the backlight bothers me, but... If there's something he wants to tell me, he'll do it eventually, just like I did.’

Yuder could decide not to step back and speak his mind because Kishiar had always been by his side, not rushing him and giving him trust. So, he planned to do the same.

It was a new sensation to realize that it was okay not to force himself to endure even though it was certainly painful.

Embracing the unavoidable wait as just that, a wait, and not as an escape, Yuder quietly observed the man who might be feeling emotions not so different from his own.

"Yuder!"

After the meeting, Yuder was immediately surrounded by his close colleagues. With Kanna, Gakane, Ever, Devran, the Eldore siblings, and even Pruelle and Revlin gathered, it almost felt like they were not in the south but in the capital.

Kishiar had included all the personnel who had been on the mission in the capital last time in this support list. Like Ever, it was to give them another chance to redeem themselves for their lingering regrets and resentments.

Knowing this, even the usually playful Eldore siblings were quiet and serious throughout the meeting today. Just seeing that was enough to understand how much they valued this support mission.

"You look a bit thinner than before. Have you been eating well?"

Ever asked that as soon as she saw him, though her face looked much thinner than before. Yuder suspected it was due to the heartache from the incident with the sage.

"I'm fine. But what about you, Ever... You've taken on quite a few significant missions this time. Are you sure you're okay?"

"You're not asking that because you think I'll say I'm not confident, are you?"

Ever wrinkled his nose and laughed playfully.

"The Commander gave us a chance to redeem ourselves. Whether it's the sage or anyone else, we won't let them slip away this time."

"We feel the same."

Hinn interjected with a stubborn face. Beside her, Finn nodded, clenching his small but terrifyingly powerful fist.

Yuder turned his gaze away from their fiery eyes. Devran, feeling shy, scratched his head and began to speak.

"Uh-hum, there was a mountain of work piled up here. I might not know much else, but I'm quite good at discreetly observing my surroundings. Leave that to me."

However, that shy expression of his shattered completely under Finn's innocently devilish questioning.

"Devran, what are you planning to disguise as this time? Since we're in the South, maybe a fisherman?"

"No, Finn. It's going to be a tavern this time. They pay well, you know."

"...You little rascals. I'm not doing this just for the money, okay? Don't talk about someone's special information gathering techniques like that! Huh?!"

"Who was it again that said making extra money on the side was quite profitable?"

"And who was the one excitedly talking about skipping training in front of Yuder to do a side job?"

"Hey you brats!"

As Devran began to shout in anger, the Eldore siblings scampered away like squirrels. As Devran chased after them, the others expressed their concern in voices mixed with worry and laughter.

Seizing the moment, this time Revlin and Pruelle approached Yuder.

"Yuder! Did you hear that I finally passed as an official member?"

"Me too."

Thanks to their time as temporary members, their demeanor had become much more relaxed compared to before. But above all, it was their expressions that had changed the most.

"I heard. Congratulations to both of you."

At Yuder's congratulatory words, their expressions became even more deeply reflective.

"Um... Haha. When I heard the news, I immediately remembered the day I first met Yuder, and suddenly that memory came to mind. That's why I wanted to tell you in person."

"Ah, I felt the same way!"

A blushing Revlin hesitated, fidgeting with his hands before asking.

"So, about that... Yuder... Can you talk to us more casually? Just like you do with the other members!"

"..."

"Uh, I heard that if you ask Yuder directly, he'll do it... but if it's uncomfortable..."

Revlin's face turned red, thinking the silence was a negative response. However, Yuder's silence was simply because what they asked was so unexpectedly straightforward.

"No, it's fine. If that's what you want, I'll do it."

"Ah! That's a relief! I've always envied the other members who could talk like this, I'm so happy right now... I mean, happy!"

The encounters with the two had been quite intense, but Yuder hadn't expected them to feel this strongly.

'Somehow... this feels reminiscent of the time with Sunz and Emon.'

However, not wanting to dampen the spirits of the new members, Yuder simply nodded silently. Pruelle smiled at this.

"It's amazing. I never thought such a day would come back then, but it really did happen."

Pruelle and Revlin exchanged glances, smiling with fresh emotion. But then, Pruelle's expression turned slightly somber.

"Although I didn't perfectly complete the first mission I was assigned after becoming an official member."

"That's..."

"There's no need to console me. I'm aware of how much I lacked. But... I'm a bit worried about Deputy Commander Beck..."

Pruelle's eyes cautiously drifted towards Ever, who was busy mediating the commotion between the Eldore siblings and Devran and seemed too preoccupied to notice.

Pruelle chuckled softly at the sight, then suddenly became startled and tensed up when his gaze met Yuder's silent one.

"...Ah! Of course, I know someone like a newcomer shouldn't worry about someone like her! It's just, after the last incident, she seemed to be pushing herself too hard, and that's a bit... Ah, what am I saying. Can you just forget it? I think I spoke too presumptuously."

"I understand your concern for Ever's condition."

"Ah, do you, really?"

Pruelle was once again surprised by the simple expression of concern. He blinked at Yuder as if seeing him anew, and then suddenly slapped his own cheek.

"...What was I thinking, saying such things while the Commander is here?"

"You look quite tired. Perhaps it would be best to rest."

While the suggestion was made out of concern for Pruelle's apparent fatigue, Pruelle vehemently shook his head. Looking at his flushed face, one would be hard-pressed to believe he was a man of intelligence.

"No, it's not that. I actually wanted to ask you something. Based on the information discussed in the meeting, the First Princess of Herne is collaborating with the Cavalry. I wonder, could she be someone like us?"

"Hm... Have you ever met or heard about her before?"

"No, never. We've never really been in the forefront of social circles. I've heard rumors, but nothing more than she's the esteemed only daughter of the Herne family."

"Me too. My parents and brothers were not fond of the Herne family... Of course, they weren't particularly fond of other families either."

Though he added this with a nonchalant laugh, it was a reminder that apart from dealings with the imperial family, the relationships among the four great ducal families were not exactly amicable.

"However, if there's someone like us there, I would definitely want to help."

Revin spoke with a bright face, suggesting that their own experiences could be helpful to another. Excluding the fact that Princess Myra of Herne was not an Awakener, it was a commendable attitude to have.