

Turning 79

Chapter 79

"Someone was buried here, the blood was spilling. It's clear that they're gone. Looking at the circumstances, they didn't escape on their own, but who took them away?"

After finishing his speculation, similar to Yuder's, Nahan quietly turned his head to look deep into the forest. It was hard to make out footprints from the long-accumulated pile of leaves, but once he knew that someone had been here, several traces caught his eye.

A young branch that looked broken as if someone had bumped into it, weeds growing in the crevices of rocks that had been stepped on, and faint brown shoe prints on a white stone. Perhaps the brown was a footprint left by stepping on blood.

'Two... or maybe three.'

Yuder, who guessed the number of people here through these signs, stood up from his place.

"Do you intend to follow?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think it would be better to return and come back with your companions? We don't know what kind of enemy lies ahead."

"It doesn't matter who's there."

Unless it was an Archmage who had trained only in attack magic all his life in the Pearl Tower, or a swordmaster with ample battlefield experience, there were few in this world who could injure Yuder. Considering that Yuder had even more practical experience, he would not easily yield to anyone.

It was more important not to miss the traces they had finally found than fearing an unknown enemy.

"If you're scared, go back alone."

"How could you think that? Who do you think discovered this pit? If I were a coward, I wouldn't have followed you guys in the first place."

'Then why on earth did he ask such an unnecessary question?' Yuder frowned, thinking him as inscrutable as Kishiar.

He started walking, turning his body as if to say follow if you want, and if not, don't. Shortly after, he faintly heard Nahan's footsteps behind him. The traces led them deeper into the mountains, choosing only the paths less travelled by.

"Doesn't something feel strange?"

Nahan spoke again as they approached a valley, and the radius of the forest began to widen. Yuder, carefully searching for traces, responded roughly.

"What."

"As we go deeper, the path is getting wider."

"It might be a place where the path merges with the one used by the people from the nearby village."

"No. It's a bit different from that..."

As Nahan mumbled something, he suddenly grabbed Yuder's arm. At the same time, the air around them wavered, and the color subtly changed.

"What are you doing."

"Someone is coming."

Just as he said, a few unfamiliar faces appeared from the opposite path moments later. At a glance, they looked like ordinary hunters, but there was no sight of tools such as snares or daggers for dismantling traps, which are commonly carried by hunters.

They seemed completely oblivious to Yuder and Nahan, casually chatting as they gradually approached.

"Still not talking, huh? Such a stubborn bastard."

"Yes. Seems like he thinks he's somebody now that he's received a surname from the Emperor. He's too stubborn to speak a word."

"Tsk. There's no cure for an old dog. Despite dying, he's still so full of life. What the hell were the guys who were supposed to control him doing?"

"Apparently... he's one of the capable men that Duke Peletta gathered from all over the Empire. They are trying, but it's hard. Please understand."

"Perhaps it would be better to simply handle them moderately and let them go, rather than using the family as bait," a voice said.

Yuder instinctively realized who they were talking about.

'Devran.'

Indeed, Devran was still alive. He wasn't sure if the one dragged away and buried, bleeding in the pit, was Devran, but it was a relief that the path seemed to be leading the right way.

"Ah, and... there's one more thing I need to report to the Warden."

"What is it?"

"The youngest Hartan has asked for help. He says Duke Peletta has already sent someone, suspecting something."

"Someone?"

The man called the Warden stopped in his tracks. Through the branches, a blurry view of brown hair and a face was visible. For a moment, Yuder froze as he realized that this man was from his previous life's memory.

'That guy is...'

The Apeto Dukedom, one of the four great dukedoms. In Yuder's memory, it was a place quieter than the other dukedoms but equally sinister.

The man who was going to receive the title of Duke of Apeto about five years later had the same face as this Warden, who had been his direct subordinate.

Younger than his memory, but it was definitely him. He had seen his face and greeted him several times at the party he had attended as a Cavalry commander.

'I can't remember his name, but there's no doubt about it.'

People from the Apeto Dukedom were in the east, where the Diarca Dukedom's power was strong. It wasn't impossible for them to be there, but it was strange to run into them on this mountain, especially since the circumstances made it clear they were the ones who took Devran Hartude.

Without knowing exactly what was going on, Yuder tried to quickly recall his memory while not missing the conversation unfolding before him.

"Yes. They sent four people, all of whom are said to be capable."

"It's a bit early, but we did expect them to send such people. If we ignore them, they'll find nothing and return. Tell him to ignore it. Instead, tell them to pay more attention to his brother!"

"I conveyed as much, but it seems he's still worried. He was asking us to send someone in case the Diarca side notices something because of their rampaging."

"We don't have people to spare. Did he not anticipate even this situation when he betrayed Diarca and killed his own father and sister? He's the one who reached out to us, blinded by the desire for a small-town lordship. Tsk! Just ignore that coward."

"Understood."

"We've already found everyone we could find here, and soon we'll be off, so just dealing with them casually is enough."

The Warden clicked his tongue and moved on, his expression filled with dissatisfaction.

'Zakail Hartan betrayed Diarca and joined hands with Apeto, then killed the previous lord and his sister... All for the lordship.'

It was an unexpected story.

'But even if he's after the lordship, what does any of this have to do with Devran?'

As he watched the Warden's party heading uphill, Yuder moved to follow them without realizing it. However, Nahan, who was holding his arm, stopped him.

"Don't get any closer."

"..."

"Although we had covered ourselves with an illusion to appear as trees, there could still be those who were sensitive enough to notice our presence."

A murmuring, as though someone were saying 'like you,' seemed to drift on the edge of hearing.

Just then, one of the men who had silently followed the group, dressed as a hunter, suddenly turned his head and looked toward Yuder and Nahan.

"Over there!"

"What?"

"I heard something from over there!"

It appeared that Nahan's advice had come too late. The men dressed as hunters took up a defensive stance all at once, and the Warden also turned his body, revealing a cold gaze.

"Who's there! Reveal yourself!"

Although they had not yet detected the illusion, it was only a matter of time until they did, now that they knew something was there. Yuder subtly moved his right hand to rest on the hilt of the practice sword loosely hanging at his waist.

"... Count to three and then dispel the illusion."

"Are you planning to handle all of them by yourself?"

"It's not a problem, just keep track of the time."

Yuder etched the number and positions of the people in front of him into his mind and began to count quietly.

"One... two...."

"Ha! Okay, we come out. What now?"

His count to three was cut off. Yuder, hand still resting on the hilt of his sword, turned around. Two people were emerging from behind the rocks near where Yuder and Nahan were standing.

One person was unknown, but the other was very familiar. He was Kiolle Da Diarca, a member of the Diarca family and a knight from the Imperial Knights.

'...Why is he here?'

"You guys are pretty quick on the uptake. What are you doing here?"

"..."

"I am Senior Knight Kiolle Da Diarca of the Imperial Knights. This is one of the places where the Imperial Knights come to train every year, under the auspices of the Diarca family. I have never heard of people like you staying here. Who are you?"

Kiolle's gaze was as arrogant as ever. As he scrutinized the people from the Apeto dukedom, the Warden stepped forward. Yuder could see an intense whirl of emotions stirring ceaselessly within his eyes.

"Ah, so you are the knights of the Imperial Knights. I've heard much about your reputation. Have you come here... hmm. For training?"

"Didn't you hear what I just said? That's right!"

"We're just passing hunters... we'll leave soon. So please don't be too angry."

Given that he didn't know how much Kiolle had heard, the Warden seemed to have decided to play dumb. However, all Kiolle saw in his eyes was a hint of contempt.

"Hunters, huh. Do you think I'd believe that?"

"...It's true. We are....."

"Dogs of Apeto daring to venture this far without fear. You must not fear death. I'll figure out what kind of tricks you've been pulling here and report it to my father."