

Turning 81

Turning

Chapter 81

"It's all because of Kiolle. He stormed out in protest of this training..."

"Hmm. So, you were forced to follow such a lad and ended up running into us. That's unfortunate indeed."

If he had arrived just a little later, or if he had stayed quiet where he was, none of this unpleasantness would have happened. The Warden's words made the subordinate knight grind his teeth in agreement, bowing his head even lower.

"So, you didn't know we were here?"

"We honestly didn't."

"How much of our conversation did you overhear?"

"...I heard from the part where you mentioned four Awakeners. But I didn't listen properly. I only heard Apeto's name because Kiolle recognized one of your faces and got angry. I didn't know who your family was."

"He recognized the face?"

The steward turned to glare at Kiolle, his face wrinkled in annoyance. Kiolle met his gaze defiantly, still bleeding yet unbowed.

"Did you see us before, you idiot of the Diarca family?"

"That's right. That brat behind you, the one always accompanying the second of the Apeto family. The audacious one who dared to spill alcohol on my shoes!"

At Kiolle's words, the man next to the Warden looked taken aback, apparently surprised that Kiolle truly remembered him.

"...So, you have a better memory than I thought."

"Do you take me for a fool? I intended to punish him at that time, but that cunning scoundrel managed to sneak you away and we moved on. I may forget other things, but never something like that!"

Through Kiolle's outburst, it became clear to everyone that he never forgot even the smallest of grudges.

'Weak and arrogant, yet never forgets a grudge... Those types are the most bothersome.'

Yuder sighed softly, recalling the two times he had knocked down the man. The Warden also seemed to share the same thought, rolling his narrow eyes in contemplation.

"Was it Pavel? Thanks to you, it seems like we have less trouble, so we express our gratitude."

"Then...!"

Just as the subordinate knight was about to lift his head as if he wanted to ask if he was going to be spared, his voice abruptly cut off. A hunter-clad Awakener had quietly approached and swiftly pierced his neck.

"Co, ugh!"

The subordinate knight clutched at his throat as he collapsed. Amidst the spurting blood, he quickly breathed his last.

"Paviel...! Urgh!"

"Knock him out and bring him along. There shouldn't be any repercussions, so we should extract some information about Diarca before killing him."

Yuder watched as the hunters carried Kiolle, who had collapsed after being hit on the head, next to Paviel's lifeless body, treating them like mere baggage.

Only after the noise had sufficiently subsided did Nahan remove his hand from Yuder's shoulder. The surroundings, which had seemed slightly faded, returned to their original vivid colors. The illusion ability that had been hiding their presence had ended.

Yuder slowly moved forward, looking down at the ground stained with blood from Paviel's corpse.

"Taking the corpse, they must be planning to make him disappear without a trace."

Seeing the blood-stained ground, Nahan muttered to himself, briefly turning his gaze away. Yuder immediately shook his head to contradict his words.

"No, they're probably trying to manipulate the culprit."

What they wanted was to interrogate Kiolle about the Diarca Ducal Family, extract as much information as they could, then kill and dispose of him. The best way to avoid raising the Diarca's suspicions was to create a separate perpetrator.

The easiest option would be to frame the deceased knight, but if that wasn't feasible, they would likely shift their focus to the Cavalry staying in Hartan. There was a good chance they had already considered this far. Either way, it didn't bother Yuder much.

'First, follow them and confirm their destination, then...'

"Apeto. Diarca. According to what I know, these are all names of prestigious ducal families. Am I right?"

As he continued his thoughts, preparing to follow the people of the Apeto family who had taken Kiolle and disappeared, Yuder turned his head at the sudden question.

Somehow, the illusion that had enveloped him was now completely dispelled, revealing his original form. One of his grey eyes, visible beneath his dark blue hair that resembled the night sky, stared intently at Yuder.

"...Yes, you're right."

"That's surprising. My brothers always said that the nobles here just hate the emperor, but their relationships with each other are quite strong. But it seems it's not quite so."

"..."

The people of the Apeto family, behaving suspiciously in a region under the strong influence of the Diarca, were bold enough to attempt to kill a member of the Diarca family that found them. Seeing this, it would be natural to think they were not in good terms, but Yuder's thoughts differed.

In his past life, while serving as the emperor's confidant, he had seen many aspects of the Four Great Ducal Houses. To Yuder, they appeared like a legendary serpent monster with many heads but one body.

They constantly bit and fought each other for better prey, but their survival as a whole always took precedence.

For instance, even if it were revealed that the Apeto family killed Kiolle, the son of the Diarca family, the Diarca wouldn't openly protest to the Apeto family.

They might take small, private revenge beneath the surface, but they would never let it escalate into a major feud between the families. That was the tacit rule of the Four Great Ducal Houses, handed down for a thousand years since the founding of the Empire.

'As long as order is maintained, glory is everlasting.'

That's what the Emperor Yuder served in his past life once said about this fact. Therefore, he shouldn't conclude from this incident alone that relations between the ducal families were bad.

They were a very strange group, killing each other one moment, yet willing to sacrifice their lives to protect each other in different matters.

However, he wasn't inclined to explain such complex facts to Nahan in detail. As Yuder remained silent, Nahan soon changed the subject.

"The risk of being discovered from now on will be much higher than before. We don't know how many more of our brothers are in the direction they're heading. But you're going to continue, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Yuder's answer was short and concise. Nahan slightly raised the corners of his mouth, as if he had expected this response, and promptly restored his illusion.

They continued to climb deeper into the mountains, following the traces of the people from the Apeto family. Thanks to the large number of people moving at once, footprints and bloodstains were more distinct, making it much easier to trace them. It was fortunate.

"Look, it leads into a cave over there."

Their trail led deep into the valley, finally ending inside a cave. It was cleverly hidden between the rocks, so much so that without the blood droplets marking the path, they might never have found it.

Upon listening closely, they could faintly hear the sound of human voices echoing from within. The source was unquestionably there.

'We've confirmed the location, so we can return and contact Gakane and Jimmy...'

However, the presence of many more people inside than they had anticipated made them wary. Although there was no immediate need to make contact, the people inside the cave might never be found again if not sought out now. Yuder composed himself and turned to Nahan.

"Could we hide ourselves again as we did earlier and enter?"

"I'm not sure. It's easy to hide in a forest by blending with the trees, but in a cave, it's difficult to figure out what we could disguise ourselves as."

"That does sound challenging."

Yuder decided they would incapacitate anyone they encountered as soon as they entered. At times like these, the best strategy was to launch stones with the wind.

"What are you looking for?"

"A stone to launch."

"You're going to throw a stone? Why?"

"Because if we can't hide and enter, it's faster to knock everyone we meet unconscious."

At Yuder's explanation, Nahan made a strange expression.

"I guess you're not joking."

"I don't do pointless things."

"...In that case, we might not have to wait very long. Someone is coming out from within."

True to his words, the voices from within the cave were growing louder. A shadow began to stir, prompting Yuder and Nahan to hide amongst the dense trees.

Two of the hunter-dressed underlings, who had followed the man they'd called 'Warden' earlier, emerged from within. Yuder guessed they had come out to fetch water, noticing the large water jugs in their hands.

'Were they both Awakeners... This works in our favor.'

Yuder felt around with his foot, picking up two small pebbles. As he threw them, he employed the full force of the wind.

Soon after, there was a sound akin to fruit being struck by a stone, followed by the two men collapsing onto the ground. Yuder approached them and thoroughly examined their unconscious bodies.

"Did you kill them?"

"They're only unconscious."

Yuder responded to Nahan's question while searching through the unconscious men's belongings, finding a small dagger and a few cigarettes. It seemed they had not just come out for water, but had intended to have a smoke and rest as well.

'Nothing much of note here.'

Using the dagger, Yuder ripped pieces from their clothes to tie up their hands and legs, then stuffed cloth into their mouths. He hid them well behind the same trees they had concealed themselves in earlier. After this, he turned to Nahan, who had been observing the entire scene, without any hesitation.

"You mentioned earlier that you didn't know what to disguise ourselves as inside the cave."

Nahan's eyes widened slightly as if realizing what Yuder was about to say. A look of astonishment, or perhaps incredulity, flitted across them, only to disappear shortly after.

"That's right."

"It seems we have figured it out now."

Turning

Chapter 82

Nahan gently closed and opened his hand, his figure shifting to resemble one of the unconscious individuals. Yuder couldn't see his own appearance, but he looked down at his body, which seemed to be wearing unfamiliar clothes, and realized that the illusion ability had been properly applied.

They pocketed the personal items of the unconscious ones and entered the cave with their water containers. The outside was so dense that it seemed impossible to see an inch ahead, but unexpectedly, it was not so dark inside.

Following an obviously artificially carved path, they were taken aback as someone suddenly stuck out his face from within. It was a man they hadn't met before.

"Huh? Who are you guys? Did you already return from fetching water?"

Yuder didn't respond immediately. Neither did Nahan. Seeing this, the man's face twisted into an annoyed expression.

"Ah, I see. You didn't even get water and just came back smoking your pipes? You're caught now. Today, I can finally show the Warden how useless you guys are! Hand over your water container! Show it to me!"

The man rolled up his sleeves and confidently approached them. Yuder subtly used his power to fill the empty water containers that he and Nahan were holding in a flash.

If Nahan had stumbled due to the suddenly heavy water container, they would have been immediately exposed. However, Nahan merely glanced at Yuder once, standing firm without any significant movement.

"I've disliked you since you were selected just because you could use some insignificant ability. What do you think is so great about you guys? You're no different from the guys locked up in there! All of you are nothing but liars...!"

The man, who was coming towards them all fired up, fell silent instantly when he saw the water container filled to the brim.

"...Huh?"

"Can we go now?"

In the brief moment the man was stupefied, Yuder quickly responded in a low, indifferent voice.

"Uh... uh huh. How did you manage to get water in such a short time..."

"Let's go."

Leaving the shocked man behind, Yuder emptied the water from the container again. Similar incidents occurred with several others, but no one was able to discern their disguises.

Through the disgusted gazes of the others, Yuder was able to glean some information about this place.

Inside this cave, several Awakeners were imprisoned. The person they called the Warden was said to be 'selecting' these Awakeners. The individuals Yuder and Nahan were disguised as were Awakeners specially employed to protect the Warden who was doing dangerous things.

'Just based on the revealed information, it's clear this isn't an ordinary place.'

Although he didn't show it, Yuder was internally astonished. He already knew in his previous life that there were nobles who used the Awakeners like slaves.

However, that was considered akin to buying skilled slaves from other countries, hence it was treated as private affairs of the high-ups that couldn't be infringed upon.

In this era, where only about two years had passed since the Awakeners had revealed themselves to the world, he had never heard of a family capturing Awakeners on such a large scale.

'Selection, huh? What are they planning to do with the selected Awakeners? In my previous life, the Apeto family was consistently loyal to the emperor and never caused any major incidents related to the Awakeners...'

Could the Apeto family really have been involved in something like this? Yuder furrowed his brows, recalling Nahan's words, 'In the East, it's common for Awakeners to be falsely accused and disappear after being arrested'.

If those who had been caught experienced a similar ordeal, it meant that at least two noble families in the eastern region were engaging in such activities, targeting the Awakeners.

'I wonder if Kishiar was aware of this.'

Had he known, given his nature, he would have certainly mentioned it before sending Yuder. Yuder, who had lived several years longer than Kishiar, hadn't known about such occurrences in his previous life, indicating there was a high chance that Kishiar too hadn't known. This led to a certain speculation.

'Even though they had kidnapped the Awakeners, either their intended purposes hadn't been achieved, or perhaps they were achieved sooner than expected, and they felt no need to maintain these places any longer, quickly closing them down.'

In his previous life, the missions Yuder had been directly assigned were nearly always the most dangerous, involving handling monstrous threats or the assassination and capture of rebels.

After becoming the Cavalry Commander, the Emperor told Yuder not to take interest in anything other than what he was specifically ordered to, and strictly prohibited him from taking independent action without permission.

Even if not for that command, Yuder hadn't had the leeway to divert his attention elsewhere, busy as he was with managing the Cavalry, the most dangerous group on the continent.

It was only when several years had passed since his rise to the position of Commander and he started doubting whether there might be some hidden motive behind the events happening all around the world, that he was able to shift his focus outward.

In the blind spots he hadn't had a chance to look into in his previous life, what were they trying to achieve by doing such things?

"...A fork in the path."

Nahan spoke quietly to Yuder, who was deep in thought while walking. True to his word, there was a fork in the path before them. According to the information given by those they had encountered before, the left path led to a prison, while the right led to the space where the Warden and others stayed.

"To the left."

Yuder promptly decided the direction, feeling around the cave floor and picking up a few pebbles to put in his pocket.

The path leading to the prison was steep and exceptionally winding. They hadn't placed many magic stones to provide light, so it was extremely dark. They had to feel their way along the wall to move forward.

"Who goes there?"

After walking for a while, they came across three Awakeners sitting in the middle of the path. Recognizing them as the underlings of the Warden they had encountered earlier, Yuder felt dismayed.

'They must know the owners of these disguises... they'll discover us soon.'

If they were discovered, they could knock them out, but dealing with Awakeners was tricky. If they didn't succeed in one hit, a ruckus could arise.

As Yuder was contemplating throwing a stone from his pocket, the seated Awakeners spoke with bored expressions.

"Number 2, Number 4. It's not time for shift change yet, why are you here early? And what's with that water container?"

"You said you were going out for a smoke. Don't tell me that red-haired old man started a fight again?"

'These guys... don't they call each other by name? Lucky.'

Yuder, releasing his grip on the tightly held water container, calmly opened his mouth.

"Well, something like that."

"I knew it. That crazy old man. Does he think we're here because we like it? I'd have killed him before he got me in here."

"The conditions are terrible. Why on a day like today, after fighting to the death, without proper treatment, we're trapped in this sunless underground?"

"Exactly, my wounded arm still hurts."

As if they had been waiting to speak, the three of them started to argue at the same time. Then, from the dark corridor, there were a few small sounds like a suppressed groan of a beast. The Awakeners continued talking, not paying any attention, but Yuder felt the sound was very unsettling.

"What's that noise, Number 3?"

"I'm Number 1. Number 3 is with the Warden."

Yuder had randomly picked a number to draw the others' attention to his question, but unfortunately, he called for someone who wasn't present. Yuder quickly changed his approach.

"Sorry, I have a condition where I can't see well in the dark. What's that noise, Number 1?"

"It's the whimpering of the young man from the noble family we caught earlier. But did you have such a condition?"

'Ah, so I'm Number 2.' Yuder nodded his head, trying to remember the nickname of his character.

"Yes, I mentioned it before. Try to remember. So, has he been like this since then?"

"Yeah. It's so annoying. Doesn't that boy know when to give up? He should save his energy, since he's going to die anyway. Among those trapped here, he's probably the worst."

"If it weren't for the Warden's orders, I would have shut him up."

Kiolle da Diarca seemed to attract no sympathy even for a stranger he had just met.

'Impressive if nothing else.'

Thanks to the continuous, grim, and desperate whimpering of Kiolle, the atmosphere among the Awakeners became more relaxed.

The three Awakeners seemed to have stopped doubting Yuder and Nahan. Yuder, while casually agreeing with their trivial chat, pointed towards the inside as if he found something.

"Wait, is that guy...?"

"Huh? ...Eek!"

"What...Ugh!"

Although his voice lacked any surprise, fortunately, the Awakeners fell for it. As they turned their heads in surprise, three stones flew and hit the back of their heads.

Looking down at the three Awakeners who fell without making a sound, Yuder signaled to Nahan who had been quietly standing.

"Number 4. Search their pockets quickly."

"I'm Number 4?"

"I'm Number 2, so you must be Number 4."

Even though Nahan looked as if he might say something, he didn't utter a word. He kneeled down and rummaged through the pockets of the Awakeners, finding a bundle of keys. Yuder took them and moved forward decisively.

Not long after, several small rooms with solid iron doors appeared. They were designed with iron bars at the top to allow looking inside.

Turning

Chapter 83

"Devran Hartude. Is Devran Hartude here?"

"..."

Even after the voice echoed, the prison remained eerily quiet. Even Kiolle's groans had subsided, intensifying the grim atmosphere.

"Devran Hartude. I am a Cavalry member here to rescue you. The Commander has ordered me to bring you. If you're here, answer."

Having said that, Yuder quietly counted in his mind. He planned to open all the doors at once if there was no response after counting to a hundred.

Fortunately, around the count of ten, someone from inside a cell drew a ragged breath and spoke.

"Are, really, Cavalry?"

Suspicion and trembling could be felt from the exhausted voice. Yuder moved toward the cell where the voice originated, fumbling with a bunch of keys.

"Devran. Is that really you?"

Before inserting the key, he asked for final confirmation. A dark shadow within the cell sluggishly stirred. With a voice that sounded strangled, as if at the brink of death, the figure managed to speak.

"...Yes. I am, Dev, ran."

Yuder glanced back at Nahan and gave a subtle nod. The man, understanding the signal to disable the illusion ability, immediately moved his hand to dispel the power.

Yuder began to unlock the door with the keys he held. Fortunately, on the third attempt, the lock clicked open with a metallic sound.

The cell was narrow and filthy. Amidst the stench of blood and waste, a single person was sitting. Yuder halted when he saw the man's hands and feet bound by iron chains that looped through two rings on the upper part of the wall, constricting his neck.

Yuder was well aware of this method of binding. The victim's hands and feet were stretched painfully until the chain around the neck loosened just enough, only to strangle the victim if they relaxed even slightly.

It was one of the methods used on the most dangerous criminals. Yuder, having experienced it in his past life, knew all too well the malicious agony it inflicted.

A criminal bound this way couldn't even sleep properly. If they relaxed their strained limbs due to fatigue, they would be strangled to death.

The reason why most people trapped in this prison could barely make a noise was that they were all bound in the same way. Yuder grimaced at the scene more brutal than he expected and drew the practice sword attached to his waist.

"It's, impossible. This chain isn't, ordinary..."

Devran tried to articulate that ordinary strength wouldn't be able to break the chain, but Yuder's sword touched the chain and cut it faster than he could finish.

With a clanging sound, his arms lost their strength and fell to the ground. The chain around his neck lost its purpose. Devran managed to gasp, his suppressed cough exploding out.

"Cough, cough!"

Yuder conjured up some light to illuminate the cell further. He wanted to get a clearer look at Devran's face.

"Devran. Can you see my face?"

"I, I can. Yuder, of the, Shin...."

Devran indicated that he had managed to recognize Yuder, despite his ragged, labored breaths. His condition was grim, marred by blood and filth, yet no signs of permanent damage or broken bones were visible. Whoever had handled Devran had not intended to kill him; this much had become clear.

"Yes, your mind seems to be intact, that's good. Now tell me, what happened to you?"

"..."

At those words, Devran wore a deeply pained expression. His hand, full of wounds, but once likely robust, clutched at the hem of Yuder's garment. Between his disheveled hair, an anger smoldered in his uniquely brown eyes.

"...I was, tricked. It was, a trap, from the start....."

Tricked? By whom?

Yuder knelt on one knee, directly meeting Devran's gaze.

"By whom?"

"They tried, to sell off, Dermilla, while I was away. So, I...!"

"Hold on. It's hard to understand you. Try to answer concisely."

Yuder gently patted Devran's shoulder, who was unable to hide his agitation even as he was coughing. Underneath his calm voice, Devran shot a resentful glance at him but quickly quieted down when Yuder created a small ball of water in mid-air.

"Drink this first."

"...Thank you."

After swallowing the ball of water that Yuder had placed in his mouth, Devran took a moment to catch his breath. His eyes became markedly calmer. Only then did Yuder recognize that Devran was ready for a proper conversation and calmly asked,

"Start from when you went on leave. What happened?"

"...Alright. After getting leave, I went straight to my hometown."

Devran's story could be summed up as follows: He had not informed his family beforehand about his leave, so upon his arrival, he noticed a strange atmosphere among the surprised villagers. The reason became clear once he reached his home.

'Devran, my boy! The Lord has ordered your sister, Dermilla, to marry a man from the neighboring village!'

His father, whose one leg had been impaired due to an accident from his youth, clung to Devran, shedding tears.

'The man she's supposed to marry is a widowed blacksmith known for his rough temper, who's killed two people! When Dermilla resisted, he locked her up in the castle. They say they'll keep her until the wedding day and then send her off. What are we to do?'

Devran felt his world darken. What he had feared had finally come to pass.

His father didn't know, but his younger sister had fallen in love with Zachlis, the Lord's eldest son, a long time ago. However, Zachlis, knowing his father would never approve of his marriage to a commoner, had enlisted in a Knight Order far away to avoid his father's watchful eyes.

Upon settling there, he had promised to come back for Dermilla, a promise she had shared with Devran. He remembered the anger he felt when he heard this.

That's why Devran was overjoyed when he was accepted into the Cavalry, even if it meant his awakened powers were known and he had to endure the scorn from his village. He had no trust in nobles; he only wanted to get his family out as soon as the opportunity arose.

In that process, he considered the worst-case scenario to be Zachlis pressuring the Lord to prevent him from leaving. But he had not anticipated things would turn sour this quickly.

What would have happened if he hadn't taken his leave? He felt suffocated.

"Sir Zachlis? Is he not in the village at present?"

"Why him? He, of course, must still be with the knight order..."

There was no mistaking it: somehow, the relationship between the Lord's eldest son and the commoner girl had been discovered. Despite not knowing why, seeing the Lord maliciously trying to send Dermilla to the neighboring village made it clear.

Could it be that the Lord just wanted to get rid of Dermilla? It might be early, but what if he went to him and asked if they could leave for the capital together with their family?

The request that he had already intended to make had merely been expedited, and it was not like the Lord wanted to have a dispute with him, and made a foe of the Cavalry.

Devran had faith in the presence of the Cavalry behind him and the name of the Duke of Peletta, Kishiar La Orr.

"I went to the castle of the Lord. Though the Lord himself wouldn't meet me because he was unwell, his eldest daughter, Zupiel, who came to inherit the title, thought it would be better to listen to me. Thanks to her, I was able to return home safely with Dermilla. I decided to take my father and Dermilla to the capital when my vacation ended. But that night... the Lord called for me again."

He had a bad feeling about it. Devran told his father and sister not to leave the house and headed alone for the Lord's castle. However, what he faced upon entering the castle was a fierce fire, as if to swallow the entire castle.

"It was obvious at a glance that it wasn't an ordinary fire. There was an Awakener who could wield fire there that day."

Devran not only had the ability to summon fire, but also to control an existing one to some extent. However, no matter how hard he tried, the fire spread uncontrollably, almost as if it had a will of its own.

He was captured by the villagers who, misunderstanding him as the culprit, rushed at him in anger. He was thrown into prison, confused and worried about his father and sister.

"The next day, Zakail, the Lord's youngest son, returned and declared me guilty. And then, I..."

After being beaten to near-death in prison, Devran was buried alive near the Rock of Death, where prisoners were buried, with a sack over his face, at a time when he couldn't tell if it was day or night. When he woke up, he was here.

'Are you awake? Let's have a chat now.'

A strange man greeted the conscious Devran. He introduced himself as one who followed the 'High One.'

'I was doing some tedious work before you showed up.'

Through the man and his subordinates, Devran learned a lot. They were expanding the power of the Duke of Apeto secretly in the East, where the support of the Diarca ducal family was strong.

They had been attending to the request of a 'Contractor' who had agreed to support them and joined hands, when Devran suddenly appeared.

'You're kind of special among all the Awakeners. It's a stroke of luck, being able to capture the confidant of the cunning Duke Peletta.'

The man wanted to extract information about the Cavalry and Duke Peletta from Devran. But Devran never opened his mouth.

The Cavalry was the place that had saved his life, and the Emperor and Commander Kishiar were the ones who had acknowledged him for the first time. He had lived in contempt as a commoner, but he vowed never to betray.

Turning

Chapter 84

When they realized their scheme had been exposed, they changed their methods. They attempted to persuade him using the lives of his father and younger sister as bait and subjected him to severe torture, just shy of breaking his bones.

Moreover, they had attached a magic bomb to his body, which would instantly detonate upon detecting any use of his abilities, rendering him powerless.

Devran could only hope that they would sense something was wrong when he failed to return to the Cavalry.

He cherished his family, but he hated the thought of betraying the Cavalry just as much. Incredibly, his heart had hardened in the mere months since he joined the Cavalry to an extent he could hardly believe himself.

And now, the hope sent by the Commander himself had truly appeared before him.

Devran knew that the man with black hair standing before him was the most skilled among the 330 Cavalry members. The fact that he had come felt like faith and salvation given to him by Commander Kishiar, and he couldn't help but shed tears. His patience and faith had not been in vain.

"Using the lives of your family as a threat... Did they show you proof that they are alive?"

"No. But I heard their voices. From outside where I'm held..."

The man named Yuder Aile spoke these chilling words with an incredibly cool demeanor, neither showing pity nor contempt for Devran.

In the past, Devran had thought his coldness distasteful from afar, perhaps due to his exceptional abilities. But now, he couldn't have felt more reassured by his attitude.

"On the day of the fire, did you see who the real perpetrator was?"

"I didn't see. But I know who it was."

"Who was it?" Yuder asked coldly.

"Subordinates of a man called the Warden. One used wind, and the other used fire. They mentioned having a hard time controlling the elements..."

"I think I know who you're talking about based on your description."

Yuder remembered all the abilities used by the Warden's Awakener subordinates when fighting with Kiolle da Diarca. Among them, there was one who used fire and another who controlled wind. Coincidentally, they were currently lying unconscious outside after being hit by a stone.

'Well, that's fine. It's just surprising that Zakail Hartan turned out to be more sinister than I thought.'

Yuder had suspected that Zakail Hartan was up to something, but he hadn't expected the scope of the incident to be this vast.

Zakail Hartan. The youngest son of the elderly Lord Hartan. Despite being the lowest-ranked child, unable to inherit any titles or estates, his fate had 'coincidentally' changed when the Lord and his eldest daughter died.

After the death of his father and the heiress sister, his older brother, who was gaining power in the knights' order, was expected to receive a higher title, hence would pay little attention to the small estate. As a result, Zakail was likely to inherit the estate. All this happened very 'coincidentally.'

But could such coincidences be so common in the world? Yuder knew they couldn't and added another line to his prejudiced opinion.

'If the Apeto family, who wanted to expand their influence in the East, and Zakail, who was low in the succession line, joined hands and planned everything, it all makes sense.'

The elderly Lord suddenly decided to send Devran's sister away ahead of the crucial matter of inheritance because someone had informed him about a critical piece of information regarding his eldest son at that very moment. Who could have done it? Was it not the one who had to cause a big incident to prevent the inheritance?

Zakail claimed that his delayed response to the fire incident was due to an errand he was running for his father in the next village, a coincidence that happened on the day of the fire. Yuder knew that the most suspicious individuals were just like him.

When it came to fighting Kiolle, the Warden of the Apeto family was highly irritated at Zakail's request for help. In fact, that very statement was the biggest evidence that confirmed Yuder's suspicions.

'Listening to Devran's account makes everything much more certain.'

Their mistake, however, was their attempt to squeeze Devran Hartude, a Cavalry member, into that perfect evidence.

Zakail probably wanted to get rid of Devran, a commoner woman's son he intended to use as a scapegoat for his plan, especially since Devran had suddenly obtained a leave and returned. The Apeto

family wouldn't have wanted to miss the opportunity to capture a Cavalry member who could provide them with information about Kishiar.

The two of them had similar interests and drove Devran into a trap, staging his death.

They probably thought it would take a lot of time for the Cavalry to notice Devran's disappearance and send an investigation team.

However, Kishiar sent people much sooner than expected, and unfortunately for them, Yuder himself was included.

No, it was about to become their misfortune. Starting now.

Yuder listened to Devran's sobbing as he lay on the floor, nursing his cold anger. No matter what he had been through, Devran was still alive. His limbs were intact, and if he could escape from here, he would make an excellent witness to these series of events.

"Devran. What do you think they planned to do with you if they couldn't extract information from you?"

Yuder slowly asked his final question, contemplating his next move. Devran's eyes, swollen from the beating, darkened with hatred and fear.

"...They said they'd send me to the Apeto main house. There are more skilled torturers and mages there... They said I'd make a good test subject..."

As he continued speaking, Devran gritted his teeth.

"I remember them saying that."

"Test subject?"

"That's what they kept telling me. They kept using the term 'test subject' and spoke in a language I couldn't understand."

Did that mean the Awakeners kidnapped by the Apeto family were being used for some sort of experiment?

'...I've heard something similar before.'

Yuder searched through the memories of his past life. When the Awakeners first appeared, all sorts of mages and priests flocked around them, trying to understand the source of their power and any peculiarities.

Most conducted their research in public, but there were grim rumors of those who conducted their investigations in secret, employing methods that couldn't be exposed to the world.

Of course, a lot had been discovered about the Awakeners as research progressed, and the population's transformation increased day by day, gradually slowing down the trend of conducting research by any means necessary.

'It didn't just slow down... There were so many chaotic incidents back then that that could be part of the reason.'

Yuder shook his head to clear his thoughts. He had heard everything he needed to from Devran, and now it was time to move.

"Devran. Can you stand?"

"Heh, I can."

Despite being tortured for several days, Devran's tenacity had not died. Whether it was his large frame or thick bones, Devran managed to push himself up, leaning against the wall for support. Yuder was impressed by Devran's grit as he bit down on his pain and groaned.

'Such is the way of the Cavalry.'

"From this point onward, I will free the people trapped in other rooms. Once we figure out the reason they were detained, I will release them with you. You must escape this place. If you happen to find your family in the process, that would be excellent. If I find them first, I promise to unconditionally protect them and take them with us. So, you can rest assured. Your ability is... ah. You said something about having a bomb attached? Where is it?"

"On...on my back."

Devran hastily lifted the hem of his shabby shirt. There, in an ingeniously unreachable position, was a small, black magic stone. The stone was in fact a cheap piece, embedded with a low-level spell. As long as the condition for detonation wasn't met, it was not too difficult to remove.

Yuder immediately detached the magical stone and put it into his pocket. A relieved sigh escaped from Devran, his expression bewildered.

"You've...removed it?"

"Yes."

"Just like that..."

"It's nothing if you know how. Here, catch."

Yuder tossed Devran a small dagger he had taken from the possessions of the men they had encountered outside the cave. Grasping it, Devran's expression hardened with resolve.

"Can you use your ability?"

"It's fine. All the guys we encounter on our way out... I won't let them be."

Even in his heavily wounded state, Devran, who had never lost spirit, had been tortured out of fear of a cheap magic stone bomb. In his previous life, even a newly joined recruit would not have been afraid of such a thing.

Yuder resolved to strongly recommend including methods to dismantle these cheap toys made by the mages when he got back to the Cavalry training program. If Kishiar were in charge, he would certainly accept.

"Let's go."

Emerging outside the cell, Yuder opened all the cell doors and signaled to Devran.

"I will dismantle all the chains. Let's share the responsibility of bringing them out here."

Thereafter, their operation proceeded swiftly and efficiently. Before long, except for the last prison where Kiolle was being held, all thirteen prisoners and two intruders who had been locked in eight prisons gathered in a small space in the middle of the cells.

Most of the confined people were like Devran, Awakeners from the East who had resisted being taken away to Apeto Duchy and thus had been imprisoned.

And, very fortunately for Devran, among those imprisoned were his own family.

"Father! Dermilla!"

"Brother!"

Devran's younger sister had been gagged in such a way that she couldn't speak. It soon became apparent that his father had been forced to swallow a pill that took away his voice, presumably because they thought he was too old to withstand such a gag.

But such a condition could be treated as long as they were alive. Devran hugged his family, tears streaming down his face.

His deeply worried family had been trapped in the very next room, suffering in silence, unable to even confirm each other's wellbeing. Looking at them, Yuder exhaled deeply once more.

The fact that they had been so thoroughly imprisoned but not killed, was indeed a testament to how much Apeto Duchy valued the Cavalry member Devran.

Why, though? Was there a need to extract information related to the Cavalry to such an extent?

Turning

Chapter 85

"Thank you... Thank you, Yuder. I will never forget this favor."

"Thank you. Truly, thank you."

Yuder bowed his head, watching the siblings repeatedly express their gratitude through tear-filled eyes. Until now, it had merely been a stroke of luck. If he had been even a bit later, Devran's family would already have been dead, and Devran himself might have been dragged to the Apeto Duchy.

"No need for thanks just yet. Save it for when we've safely escaped this place and reunited with Gakane and Jimmy in the castle of Lord Hartan."

"Gakane and Jimmy? They're here too?"

"Yes. But they are within the castle, so contacting them will be difficult. Don't go inside. Use your power to create a fire big enough to be seen from the castle. Gakane will recognize it and come to you."

Of course, Gakane would assume that Yuder was the one who started the fire, but he would soon realize that was not the case. Yuder had faith that Gakane, with his level of judgment, could easily evacuate everyone safely.

After all, wasn't he a seasoned veteran who had endured relentless training for a week without even a moment's rest? It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that among the current Cavalry members, there was no one who could perform their duty as excellently as Gakane.

"Ah... understood."

"We'll help, too."

As Devran nodded, other prisoners, who had been leaning on each other, raised their hands and boldly spoke up. Among them, the one who had been imprisoned the longest said he had been there for over three months.

Looking at their teary eyes filled with hope and gratitude, Yuder felt slightly strange. He wondered if it was because he had never saved or rescued people in his past life. Or was it something else?

"What abilities do you possess?"

To rid himself of that nagging sense of responsibility, Yuder quickly asked them. Most were physical enhancement users, and a few were elemental ability users like Devran. Yuder, lost in thought for a moment, slowly opened his mouth.

"Form a circle with the elemental users and ordinary people in the middle, and the rest surrounding them for protection. We've encountered several people on the way out of the cave, but none were Awakeners, so they should be easy to subdue. Once outside, do not return no matter what. Go straight to Hartan's territory and join my group."

He also told them to leave Hartan's territory as soon as possible after the reunion. Zakail Hartan was there, so it wasn't a place they could linger.

"So what will you do, Yuder?"

"I'm going to deal with that Warden and follow after."

"Will you be alright? Alone, how will you..."

"I got here by myself and I'm fine."

To be precise, he wasn't completely alone, he had the uninvited guest Nahan with him, but he didn't bother mentioning that. Devran gave him a look that seemed unsure whether to worry or to be annoyed, but quickly nodded his head in understanding.

"I see. You are strong, you'll be fine. There's always at least a mage where those bastards hang out, so be careful. The torturers are skilled swordsmen, not to be underestimated."

The information that there might be more than one mage was useful, so he made sure to remember it.

"Before we go, wait a minute. You there, your name was Dermilla, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

After ending his conversation with Devran, Yuder signaled his younger sister to come closer, beckoning her with a low call.

Even while Devran was with the Cavalry, time in Hartan had kept on flowing. The odds were high that she, who had long kept a secret relationship with Zakail Hartan's brother, would have more information.

"Zakail Hartan seems to be the provider of all events. Do you happen to know anything?"

"Lord Zakail?"

Dermilla was much more perceptive than expected and possessed a remarkably steadfast character. As soon as she heard his question, she opened her mouth as if she had guessed the situation they were in.

"Oh my. Does that mean Lord Zakail is targeting Hartan...?"

"Perhaps."

"I see. Ah. Somehow... I always believed that Lord Zachlis never abandoned me. He always used to say that he was suffocated by the excessive ambition of his family. The Lord wanted to arrange Zachlis's marriage with a noblewoman from another village to increase his family's influence. And Lord Zakail, he always wanted to acquire without working for it..."

Acquire without effort - wasn't that exactly the situation Zakail was in now? Instead of responding, Yuder merely smiled faintly.

"You seem to have a good eye for people."

"Yes. Although he is a noble, he is a truly honest and admirable person."

However, even he had been fooled by Zakail's schemes, hadn't he returned to the knight's order? Judging by his promise to return, it seemed that he had not completely believed in the death of his lover, but it must have been difficult for him to understand his sibling, who was constantly plotting while confined within the territory, given his own busy schedule as part of the knight's order.

"There's a high probability that he believes your family is dead by now."

Yuder added that the villagers believed Devran had killed his family, set their house on fire, burned down half the village, and then committed suicide in prison. They had to prevent the three family members from showing their faces to the villagers in case they spread the truth.

"It might be a little worrying, but once we're completely out of here and into the safety of the capital, I'll contact him."

"Oh, by the way..."

Dermilla, who had obediently nodded, suddenly turned her gaze as if she remembered something.

"A few years ago, Lord Zachlis apologized to me with a regretful face. He told me that he accidentally revealed to his brother his plan to marry me and leave this place forever after establishing a new base in the knight's order... But he also said that since neither of them could inherit the territory or the title, they could keep it a secret to that extent. I forgot about that after he said it, but maybe..."

Although that wasn't essentially helpful information, it seemed sufficient as a motive.

The feelings of competition against two rivals and only one were no different. Perhaps Zakail Hartan had been dreaming of the impossible from that time.

"Also, there were many rumors that Lord Zakail was a worry to the Lord because he quit school in the middle and returned a year ago, continuously wandering around the nearby villages without any reason."

"A year ago... After he returned, did he not show any strange behavior in relation to the Awakeners?"

"It was strange, really. Frankly... I thought the reason he fled to the capital was because that person treated him with such hostility. That person particularly despised those who awakened and gained power."

"That's enough for me. Dermilla, I hope you never return to the village. Also, I found this in your burnt house, I'll give it back if you need it."

Now that he had found the Devran family to be alive, the double brooch picked up from his house had served its purpose. As Yuder showed her the double brooch, Dermilla's mouth gaped open.

"That, that's..."

Yuder gently nodded, indicating that she should take it. Dermilla, her face filled with emotion, carefully accepted the brooch from Yuder's hand. Yuder almost regretted giving it back too quickly, seeing Devran's grave, uncomfortable expression as he watched his sister's joy.

"Now, those who want to leave should go. Remember all the precautions I have told you."

Yuder whispered a few tasks to Devran, to carry out when he met Gakane and Jimmy. Among them was a message to inform Kishiar of the current situation as soon as he could use the public communication device in the next village.

The imprisoned who were released began to make their way out of the cave as soon as they wrung out all the information they had learned while captive and relayed it to Yuder.

"Urgh!... Arrgh!"

"Grunt!"

'Ah, right. I forgot to talk about the three who fainted on the way out.'

Just moments after Devran and the previously imprisoned had disappeared, Yuder was reminded of the small detail he had forgotten as he heard the muffled screams.

The Awakeners, having removed the bombs attached to their bodies and gained freedom, overflowed with willpower despite their weakened state.

Indeed, the stronger their will, the more powerful the abilities they manifested. Yuder hadn't considered the possibility that they might not escape regardless of their health condition.

'Now all that's left is Kiolle da Diarca and...'

Yuder turned his head toward Nahan, who had quietly observed his actions.

"The one hidden by illusion, let him out now."

"You've found out."

"That guy must be the companion you were looking for."

Yuder had noticed that the number of people Nahan had brought from the prison and the actual number of people in sight were exactly one person off. Since then, Nahan had been overly quiet, as if hiding something.

"Yes, you're right."

At Yuder's words, Nahan moved his fingers and the dark cave wall next to him peeled away to reveal a boy with a pale face.

Yuder was slightly surprised to see that the one Nahan had hidden was so young. The boy seemed about the same age as Jimmy. He was undoubtedly the youngest among those imprisoned.

"You had this young boy purchase all the food and goods for your bandits?"

"No need for suspicion. This little brother has a power that's optimized for that kind of work."

Nahan responded with a cold smile to Yuder's gaze, which was as if looking at garbage.

"What kind of power?"

"The power to make friends."

Turning

Chapter 86

"The ability to make friends."

Yuder couldn't immediately understand what that power entailed. Despite having traveled back in time, it was the first time he'd heard of such a power. Upon making eye contact with Yuder, the boy quickly hid behind Nahan, as if frightened.

"Yes, since you've found your companion, your objective must be achieved."

Yuder thought that Nahan would just take his young ally and disappear. If it had been him, he would have done the same. After all, if they missed this moment, they might not have another chance to escape unnoticed.

"True. However, this time, I think I'll follow you to the end."

Yet, Nahan said something unexpected.

"I don't need a spectator."

"I'm an accomplice who has come this far with you. It hurts a bit to be called a spectator."

What was he thinking? Yuder grew suspicious of Nahan, more than ever before. However, there was no need to unnecessarily increase the number of enemies at this point. Thus, he decided to retreat, keeping a wary eye on Nahan.

"If it becomes a hindrance..."

"It definitely won't. Just as it hasn't until now."

Nahan was eloquent, if nothing else. Ignoring him, Yuder headed towards the last remaining prison cell. As he unlocked the door, the man tied up inside with ordinary ropes glared at him, his eyes filled with rage.

"Ugh... uuuhh..."

Of course, it was Kiolle da Diarca, the one left behind until the very end.

He tried to yell something, but because of the gag, his words were incomprehensible. Yuder stared at him for a moment before finally speaking.

"Kiolle da Diarca."

It was a name he'd tried to forget since their first encounter, yet it had eventually etched itself into his memory, which was impressive in its own way.

"I'll remove your gag, but if you scream or make any unnecessary noise that might attract attention, I'll knock you unconscious immediately. Nod if you understand."

"Uuuuhhh!!"

Kiolle thrashed about as if telling Yuder to stop spouting nonsense, twisting his head with all his might. It didn't seem like he understood Yuder's words at all.

"Do we really need to save that guy?"

Nahan, who had been watching the whole scene, asked in an indifferent tone.

"He's not a brother or sister who possesses the same power. He doesn't seem extraordinary enough to merit rescue."

"Uuuhh!! Uuh!"

Kiolle directed a furious glare at Nahan and yelled at him. Clearly, he didn't appreciate Nahan's words.

'Honestly... I can't argue with that.'

Would Kiolle even thank him for being rescued? It would be fortunate if he didn't rush at him with fists clenched right away. However, Yuder still thought it was better to prevent his death.

Whatever it was, he'd decided to prevent a repeat of the past.

'And if he dies here, they might pin Kiolle's death on the Apeto household, drawing the Cavalry's attention.'

He had to avoid any situation that could cause harm to the Cavalry at all costs. That's why he had left Kiolle until last.

"If you continue to be uncooperative, there's not much I can do. We don't have much time."

"Uh, uuuh! Uuh!!"

"Don't like it? Should I just leave you here?"

"Urrgh!"

Kiolle glared at Yuder as if he wanted to tear him apart.

"Then I suggest you keep quiet."

Yuder did not bother to get Kiolle upright; he simply slid the gag down to his chin, leaving him sprawled on the floor. The instant he did, a voice, brimming with rage, echoed out.

"You, you're that guy from the Cavalry."

Luckily, he didn't yell, but the words themselves didn't feel any less menacing. Kiolle coughed a few times, grinding his teeth and lifting his head, as Yuder watched him silently, offering no response.

"You have no idea how much I've been looking forward to seeing you again. You wouldn't know how humiliating it has been for me, banished to this countryside because of you, being watched over by idiots."

"Are you saying this is all because of me?"

"Yes! You've made a laughingstock out of me with your underhanded tactics, ruining my honor. Even my own father asked me to keep a low profile and train, casting me out. That was a first. No one would listen to me!"

'The Duke of Diarca seems to care more for this lad than I thought.'

Kiolle vented his frustration about his father, but Yuder interpreted a completely different meaning from his words.

Recalling the conversation the underlings had with the Warden of Apeto, Kiolle was likely the youngest child of the Duke of Diarca. In his previous life, Yuder had served an Emperor who was a foster son of the Diarca family, so he knew the Diarca family atmosphere a bit better than other dukedoms.

The Diarca family was the epitome of 'nobility'. They were tied together only by the family name. There was little affection between family members and relatives.

In his previous life, Yuder had encountered the current Duke of Diarca a few times, but his impression was stronger of a cranky old raccoon rather than a human being.

The current Duke died of an illness not long after Yuder took his position, but the eldest son who succeeded him as the heir was not much different.

The Emperor kept the Diarca family slightly closer due to the bond he had with them when growing up, but he never fully trusted them. The family often described this distance as being noble and very Diarca-like.

Under the old Duke of such a Diarca family, the fact that such a free-spirited son came out, and despite causing multiple accidents, he was never properly disciplined but just sent off to train, was frankly quite surprising.

'So he's the youngest son, maybe they just doted on him and let him be.'

However, Kiolle disappeared early even in the previous life. If he continued to live like this, even if Yuder saved him this time, his future didn't seem like it would change easily.

"Are you listening to me? Undo these bonds immediately!"

Yuder exhaled deeply, facing the shouting Kiolle.

"You... you impudent brat, dare to sigh?"

"And what will you do once I free you?"

Kiolle shut his mouth for a moment at the calm question showing no fear of his yelling, then opened it again with a venomous glare.

"The obvious. I'm going to bring you to your knees."

"And how, exactly? You're unarmed at the moment."

Yuder pointed out Kiolle's empty waistband. Only then did Kiolle seem to remember his weapon being taken away, opening his mouth and looking down at his waistband.

“...That, that is. I need to knock down Apeto’s dogs and retrieve it.....”

"So, what will you do without any weapons?"

"You guys will do something, right? Didn't I hear clearly that you were going to help the rest of the prisoners escape?"

"We don't necessarily have to, you know?"

Yuder purposely lied.

"To be honest, I could just leave you here and escape myself."

"What, what did you just say? How could you...!"

"So, what will you do next? Are you planning to defeat all of Apeto Duchy’s people unarmed by yourself?"

"Yes!"

Kiolle shouted as if in defiance.

"All I need is to beat someone and take their sword! So, let me go!"

"Is that all you have planned?"

At this point, Yuder stopped using honorifics.

"What?"

"I asked if that was the extent of your situational judgment, Kiolle Diarca."

"You... How dare you, a commoner, question me, a high-ranking Imperial Knight...!"

"Who's the one who passed out twice because they were weaker than a commoner, and behaved disgracefully due to inability to accept the difference in skill? Look at your state. Is your judgment that poor?"

Kiulle had probably never been spoken to in such a cold manner in his life. He was frozen, lips slightly parted, his face a mix of rage and surprise at the abusive words spouted by a commoner.

"Even with your foolish decisions, you haven't shown any remorse even after losing a comrade's life."

"Comrade? Comrade, you say. Who!"

It was then that Kiulle finally started to move, thrashing about as he let out a scream. He managed to sit up, albeit with difficulty. His noble-like demeanor had long since faded from his dirty, earth-covered face as he looked up at Yuder.

"Are you talking about the dead Paviel right now?"

"Yes."

"Did you overhear that from Apeto's dogs on your way here? Ha. That traitor being my comrade is a ridiculous joke. He betrayed me and surrendered to the enemy so he could live. It's natural that he died. How is that my fault?"

"If it's not your fault, then whose is it?"

Yuder's reply was calm, his gaze frosty.

"He was your comrade. He must have trusted you enough to get to that point. You had countless ways to make better decisions to save your own life and your comrade's. But you didn't. Blinded by anger, you risked everyone's safety, pushing yourself into a life-threatening situation. And still, you say it's not your fault that he died because of you?"

"Shut up! What do you know! Should I have cared for the one who betrayed me out of fear of death and insulted me? Why should I!"

Kiolle Diarca seemed just like a stubborn child, too full of himself to see what was happening around him. He was not the sort of person who could stand above others and take responsibility. Yuder leaned slightly towards Kiolle, who was gnashing his teeth in anger.

"That's why you have three flowers on your armor. Do you need any other reason?"

Kiolle's expression mixed with anger and confusion as their gazes met.

Turning

Chapter 87

"I came this far following the Commander's order to find our missing team member. And I am on the verge of fulfilling that order. It's my duty as the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. But what about you?"

"..."

"You couldn't protect your subordinate, you put your own life in danger, and you can't even judge the situation correctly, blinded by personal rage, charging at me without thinking again. Is that your role? You claim to be a noble, yet you can't think beyond that? Is it more important to knock me down than considering what is more crucial at this point, or what to do next? What's the use of your head?"

"What... what.....?"

Kiolle's eyes and lips were trembling.

"Whether a noble or a commoner, death is the end for both. Stab either, and the same red blood comes out. How significant do you think lineage is here?"

"You..."

Finally, as if Kiolle understood something, he swallowed his words and closed his mouth.

"So, you had no intention of saving me. So... that's why you left me till the end... to take revenge on me..."

'What would I gain by taking revenge on you.'

However, his frightened look wasn't bad. Yuder didn't bother to correct his misunderstanding and opened his cold mouth, keeping his eyes straight.

"Convince me why I should save you. If you fail to do so, you'll die here, Kiolle."

"Me? Convince? You?"

Kiolle, with wide-open eyes, asked back with a dumbfounded face.

"Yes."

"So, you won't kill me? Really?"

"If you can convince me properly."

"Ha..... Haha."

Perhaps it was a joke. His eyes, implying such a meaning, stared at Yuder. But as time passed and he saw Yuder patiently waiting, his expression slowly distorted.

'He must have never had to contemplate whether to live or die until now.'

He must not be so stupid as to prefer dying rather than trying to persuade Yuder in this situation. At least, Yuder wanted to believe that.

Yuder keenly observed Kiolle's changing expressions, which were interestingly diverse. Doubt and confusion, a sliver of hope, and the stubborn pride named self-esteem struggling within, anger and pain, and... all of these gradually crumbling, leaving behind only one emotion.

"...If you let me out of here, then, yes. My father... will reward you."

At last, the first words Kiolle managed to say were just as Yuder expected.

"Rejected."

"Why?"

As soon as Yuder shook his head, Kiolle shouted in anger with a flushed face.

"Why? Because it's unnecessary. Next."

"Unnecessary? This is the Diarca Family! We're talking about the reward of Diarca! Commoners like you die for money! What else do you need? Treasure? Would jewelry do? Or maybe a sword? Do you want a fine horse?"

"I don't care whether it's money, jewelry, or treasure. I don't need any material things. Convince me with something else."

"Damn it! Then... a position. I'll give you a position. Would a regular knight position in the Imperial Knight do?"

"Rejected."

Why would he care about the Imperial Knight, which would become an insignificant group a few years later? Yuder frowned and shook his head without a second thought. Over Kiolle's face, anger and worry mixed and rippled.

"Ah, very well. I'll speak to my father and request him to promote you to the position of Cavalry Commander. It won't be immediate, but it should be satisfactory to you."

Cavalry Commander? Yuder nearly laughed out loud. Besides it being the most absurd proposal Kiolle had made so far, it was preposterous that a mere one of the countless children of the Diarca ducal house, not even an heir, would so lightly suggest such a position.

'It shows how much regard the Diarca House has for the Cavalry.'

Feeling fortunate that Kishiar was not present, Yuder responded coldly.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not interested in anything related to status or power?"

"Damn you, then what else could you possibly want!"

"Do you always need to give something to persuade someone, is that it? Besides, you don't have the power to give anything you've mentioned yourself. That's not persuasion."

For a moment, Kiolle's expression was as if he had heard something he had never contemplated in his life.

"What I demanded was for you to provide a reason for your survival here. Not pointless wealth or status. Can't you even offer that simple thing? Do you truly believe that you're superior to the dead when you can't?"

At least Kiolle's dead subordinate knew when to kneel before his enemies in order to survive. Of course, it wasn't a good method. It led to his death, after all. But at least he was better than the current Kiolle.

"..."

"The reason why everyone here has spared you is not because you're great, but because they simply wanted to know about your lineage. Apart from that, there's currently no reason for you to live. Why should I go to the trouble of saving you, who is destined to die anyway? Would you want to save someone who insults and annoys you?"

Yuder watched Kiolle, his face pale as if he had taken a blow to the head, struggling for breath with his mouth wide open. No one had ever spoken to him like this before. It was assumed he should be treated with special deference simply because he was a son of the Diarca family.

'But I'll make him admit that it's not taken for granted.'

After all, Kiolle had to be saved and sent away from here. Then, at least this much should be corrected to make his life worth saving. It was worth the effort for the sake of future matters.

"Ha, but, the other prisoners. They were just saved... why only me...."

Whether he was convinced within Yuder's cold gaze that his status or ability held no meaning in the current situation, Kiolle's voice faded. He was experiencing the feeling of being fundamentally denied for the first time in his life.

There had been countless people who had criticized and looked down on him, but they had never been able to ignore his noble status and the name Diarca.

His status and power were the strongest armor that had supported Kiolle de Diarca. But now, with that armor gone, Kiolle was swallowed up by an indescribable fear and emptiness.

"They were innocent imperial citizens who were imprisoned simply because they awakened some power. Of course they should be saved."

"So, are you saying that I'm worse than those commoners?"

"Worse."

Yuder replied firmly.

"Even after being defeated twice, you still refuse to acknowledge your weakness and continue to pointlessly brandish your sword. How could you be the same as those who understand gratitude? Even a beast knows to lower its tail before a stronger foe. Unlike you."

"You, dare, to compare me, to a beast..."

Stammering with shock, Kiolle's face had turned as white as a sheet. From the look on his face, it seemed he was on the verge of fainting.

"Fine, fine. It doesn't matter if you don't want to save me. They can't kill me anyway. If I just wait, my father will surely come to rescue me!"

"Really, will he?"

At the soft question, Kiolle's face contorted.

"No one knows you're missing right now. The knights who came with you for the training aren't even looking for you, so how would your father know? There's plenty of time for these guys here to kill you and bury your body."

"What..."

"There will be no change even if you die, Kiolle. The death of a non-heir during a training accident wouldn't be surprising. Even if the perpetrator is revealed, the noble families won't feud over it. It's just that simple."

'You are, simply that insignificant.'

"Ah..."

At the cold declaration, Kiolle's ragged breathing stopped completely. Even if he was foolish, he was a member of a noble family, and he would've realized that Yuder's words were accurate. The words were true, so he couldn't argue against them.

It seemed like he finally grasped the reality before his eyes, unable to express his anger. Yuder looked at Kiolle's face, sensing that he had finally made a dent in his stubborn obstinacy.

"Well, if you want to die, I won't stop you. Is our conversation over?"

"..."

"Alright. It seems there's nothing more to say..."

"...Wait, wait."

Kiolle urgently called Yuder.

"I, get it. You're, you're stronger than me. I admit... I'll admit it. I'll, I'll apologize too."

Yuder, who was about to turn away, stopped his movement. To hold onto him, Kiolle struggled with all his might, trying to lift his head.

"If calling you a commoner made you angry, I take it back. If you let me out of here... I promise I'll never challenge you to a duel again. If you ask me to, I'll do anything I can!"

His bound hands gripped Yuder's robe tightly.

"So please, save me. I don't want to die here..."

Finally, the answer he wanted had come out.

Yet, Yuder didn't show his satisfaction on his face and instead slowly bent down to sit.

"You'll do anything?"

"Yes, anything."

"Even if I ask you to betray your family and the Imperial Knight?"

"..."

At that moment, Kiolle's eyes froze over.

'Well, well, he's scared. Truly a child.'

Yuder looked down at him and shook his head.

"Of course, I don't have that intention. You're not competent enough for such a task."

"You, you bastard... You're making a fool of me...!"

Turning

Chapter 88

Kiolle stared at Yuder with the face of someone that had barely survived falling straight into hell. Of course, his gaze soon diminished like a small flame extinguishing in front of a chill breeze before Yuder's direct stare.

"Admission, apology, and a declaration to do anything. All three are the best things you've said so far. Not a bad persuasion."

At Yuder's words, Kiolle managed to express a bit of hope. But Yuder soon replied with a cold look on his face.

"But why should I believe you?"

"What?"

"Anyone can say words. How can I trust the sincerity of your words? If you deny ever saying such things once we leave here, that would be the end of it."

"Damn it. Then what, what do you want me to do? Take a knight's oath here?"

"An oath is too weak."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

Kiolle had no clue what Yuder was asking of him. Watching Kiolle's puzzled face, Yuder's lips curled into a slight smile.

"Alright. I'll find a way to definitely trust your persuasion. Wait here a little."

"What? Wait a minute. You have to free me first!"

Kiolle, surprised, desperately grabbed at Yuder's hem, but to no avail. Yuder easily freed his hand, stood up from his place, and brushed off his hem.

"It'll only be a moment. You won't die in that time, so don't worry and keep your mouth shut."

"What? No. You said you'd help me! Wait! Hey! Where are you going!"

Despite his defeated situation, Kiolle was indeed Kiolle. Yuder, who was about to turn away, stopped and bent over towards him.

Despite calling out first, Kiolle sealed his lips when Yuder approached, his face slightly scared.

'Scared, indeed.'

Yuder grabbed the gag hanging around Kiolle's neck and lifted it back up.

"Gah-!!"

Kiolle widened his eyes, thrashing about, shaking his head. He had experienced all kinds of humiliations and thought he had found a way to survive, but felt like he was rolling back into hell again. His desperate demeanor was understandable.

'But one should know when to trust a person's word.'

"If you said you would do anything, then first learn to quietly wait."

"Grrgghh! Urggghh!"

"I'm going."

Yuder left the cell where Kiolle was trapped. Then he waited for Nahan and the young boy to come out, before closing and locking the door again. The muffled sounds of Kiolle could be heard from inside, but no one paid any attention.

"He will never keep his promise."

Nahan stated coldly, a blank expression on his face.

"I know."

"But how are you going to make him keep it?"

"I told you, I'm going to find a way."

Yuder replied lightly, striding forward. It wasn't long before the sight of three incapacitated Awakeners revealed themselves. They had been knocked unconscious by only throwing stones without a single injury when they arrived, but their current condition was a total mess. It was clear who had done it.

'Devran and the others seem to have been quite tormented.'

Yuder used the power of wind to lift them and distributed them into any open cell, then resumed his stride. His destination was the crossroads he had seen earlier.

He had headed towards the prison before, but this time, he had to go in the opposite direction. The final goal of the day should be there.

"Aha."

Only then did Nahan, who had been following Yuder, nodded his head as if he had guessed something.

"Indeed. There must be a way."

Not long after, the road gradually widened, and small voices began to echo from the inside. Judging by the calmness in the voices, they seemed to have not yet noticed what was happening outside.

'It means Devran and the prisoners have taken care of the ones they ran into.'

Yuder continued towards those who couldn't even imagine the silently approaching shadow of misfortune.

"...They're late."

"Hmm?"

"What is it? Are you already awake, Jimmy?"

After returning to the castle as Yuder had instructed, Gakane, who had been looking out the window, sitting next to Jimmy who lay in bed, turned his head in surprise.

Feeling somewhat sorry that his murmured words, not intended for the ears of a sleeping boy, had elicited a response, he asked, "Did you wake up because of me?"

"No, I had a good sleep... I woke up quickly. But what do you mean it's late?"

The boy's cheeks, which had been slightly feverish before bed, were now back to their usual clear complexion.

Gakane didn't notice the peculiar scent that those on the verge of a second gender manifestation exuded, but just to be sure, he lightly touched and then pulled his hand away from Jimmy's forehead. There was no fever.

"Well... no. I just think Yuder is later than I expected."

"Yuder?"

Jimmy, who had just woken up, sat up, rubbing his sleep-filled eyes. A steadily sinking sun was visible through the large window next to the bed. The crimson sunset was beautiful, but it was difficult to think so when he looked at the burnt black buildings beneath it.

Jimmy, turning his worried gaze towards Gakane who was looking out the window, said, "True... I thought he'd be back before sunset. But if something had happened to Yuder, he would've sent a signal as promised. Don't worry too much, Gakane."

Looking at Jimmy, who offered his consolation in a somewhat calm and dignified manner, Gakane managed a wry smile.

"That's true. Anyway, it's good you're awake. I was actually about to go out and check around."

"Outside... Ah. To check on that man Zakail?"

"Yeah. Earlier when you were sleeping, I went out on the pretext of getting water and got a feel for the situation. It seemed Zakail wasn't in the castle."

"He wasn't? Where could he have gone?"

"I don't know that. He might be back by now, so I want to go check again."

"Wow. I want to come too."

Jimmy's eyes sparkled as he tried to get out of bed. Gakane put out his hand, pressing down on the boy's round head to make him sit back down, shaking his head.

"You can't."

"Why!"

"People here think you're lying down because your body isn't in good shape after the long journey. The best way to scout around without arousing suspicion is for me to go out, pretending to fetch necessary items like water or towels while looking after you."

Unable to find a rebuttal to Gakane's reasonable response, Jimmy pouted his lips, looking disappointed.

"...Then hurry back. I'll be here."

"Right. But it's also important to keep an eye on the outside, so you need to keep watch until I return. If by any chance you see Yuder send up flames or any other signal, run straight to me."

"I understand."

Gakane rose from his seat, looking at Jimmy, who promptly nodded with a determined expression. Jimmy was more calm and smart in judging the situation than his peers, so he could be relied on to handle things properly. Now Gakane had his own work to do.

Not long after Gakane stepped outside the room, maids appeared across the hallway, murmuring and chatting among themselves.

They had an air of discomfort around the unwelcome guests in the castle, but Gakane did not let their attitude affect him. He greeted them warmly and approached them first.

"Hello. Could I possibly get a towel?"

"A towel? Why do you ask?"

An older maid asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

"One of our little companions isn't feeling well. He has a fever, and we need a wet towel."

"The little one... are you talking about the little brown-haired child that was with you?"

"Yes. Poor thing, he seems to have overdone it moving such a great distance so quickly. There's not much we can do; he's still a child."

While the Easterners seemed to dislike the Awakeners, they felt sympathetic toward Jimmy, who was still a child.

The maid, old enough to have children of Jimmy's age, exchanged sympathetic glances. The previously tense atmosphere softened instantly. Everything was going according to Gakane's plan.

"I'll bring one, so wait here for a moment."

"Thank you. You're really kind."

After all, how many could resist a handsome young man with a strikingly beautiful face speaking softly with a smile?

Gakane was well aware that his looks played in his favor when it came to people's favor, and he utilized this to the fullest to lower the maids' guard.

By the time the maid returned with the towel, he had naturally obtained most of the information he could get from them.

"Jimmy. I'm back. Any issues?"

"No. Did Zakail return?"

Jimmy, who was watching outside the window, swiftly turned around. Gakane nodded, placing the newly acquired towel on the table.

"Yes. He left and returned within an hour."

"So, he just met someone from the village?"

"No, that's not it. Zakail has been going out alone from the castle and returning from time to time since a year ago. But the people he met were suspicious. He's often been seen meeting unfamiliar hunters that people have never seen around here. The former lord was quite worried about it."

"Hunters, you say...."

"I don't know their identities. But I got another interesting piece of information."

"What's that?"

"Devran's younger sister had a deep relationship with Zakail's elder brother. Not long ago, Zakail told the late lord about this. The lord got angry, confined Devran's sister in the castle, and then Devran, who was on leave, seems to have come here."

Jimmy couldn't hide his surprised look as Gakane casually spilled out all the deep information he hadn't been able to gather while roaming around the village.

Turning

Chapter 89

"Wow. Did people really tell you all that? Folks we met outside didn't even bother to say a word. How on earth did you manage it?"

"It's different when a group of men in black uniforms come asking questions and when one person approaches in a non-threatening manner."

Gakane chuckled as he plopped down on a chair near the bed.

"At any rate, you have a sense of what's happening now, right?"

"I think the reason Devran disappeared must be due to Zakail."

Hearing Jimmy's deduction, Gakane's eyes softened.

"That's what I'm thinking too. When Yuder returns, let's confront Zakail directly."

"Sounds good."

Gakane and Jimmy's gazes met, holding mutual understanding as they both lapsed into silence. Jimmy couldn't hide his admiration for Gakane as he let out a small sigh.

"Gakane, you said you're an Alpha, right?"

"Alpha? Yeah, that's right."

"I'm envious."

At the sudden expression of envy, Gakane blinked quickly, his face a picture of surprise.

"What of?"

"I heard from others in the Cavalry... they said that if you manifested a second gender, you suddenly grow much taller. Were you like that?"

"Height?"

Gakane repeated, perplexed. This was the most peculiar question he'd encountered since revealing his second gender as Alpha.

"Well, not really... My height didn't change much from before I awakened. I'm not sure."

"I heard that Ever, who joined the Cavalry not long ago, is still growing after her awakening. And the commander is really tall."

"The Commander... yeah, that's true."

Gakane contemplated, recalling the figure of Commander Kishiar. While Gakane himself was tall enough to stand out among average men, Kishiar was physically remarkable.

Normally, extremely tall individuals tended to appear clumsy, but Kishiar's physique was as perfect as if it were sculpted by a god, only evoking a sense of overwhelming awe.

Although Gakane still often found it difficult to fully realize the fact that he had manifested a second gender, the Commander had the power to make even such an unusual fact seem utterly natural.

It felt as if Kishiar's second gender manifestation was an extraordinary blessing in itself.

Gakane remembered the immense and overpowering aura of Alpha he felt when he first saw Kishiar on the podium. He had met quite a few comrades who had manifested as Alphas afterward, but none were like Kishiar. He was that kind of being.

"The Commander is of imperial lineage, so he probably had that physique from the start. Most likely."

"Really?"

"Jimmy, do you want your second gender to manifest?"

Gakane carefully addressed Jimmy, who then nodded with a gloomy face.

"Why? You'll grow taller as time goes by."

The boy, whose eyes were hesitant about whether he should speak up, faltered for a moment before opening his mouth.

"I think my parents are overly worried because I'm young. But I don't want it to manifest just yet... I don't want it to hinder our mission."

"Your parents? Oh, you said they live nearby. Didn't you visit them during the recent holiday?"

At Gakane's question, Jimmy shook his head.

"I had been staying at the house of my father's friend who lives in the capital. My parents had asked me to."

"Why... Ah."

Gakane, who had been about to ask why, recalled the words spoken to him by the bandit chief who had introduced himself as Nahan and faltered. As if Jimmy knew what Gakane was thinking, his gaze darkened.

"My parents told me that because the shop is very busy, even if I take a sudden vacation like this, I might not get to see them. I thought they were telling the truth... but thinking about it now, I guess they weren't. When I sent them a letter, my mother told me that the next time we meet, it would be when they came up to the capital for business. I guess they didn't want me to come back to my hometown."

In the South, where Gakane lived, the atmosphere wasn't particularly hostile towards the Awakeners, so it wasn't easy to find words of comfort for Jimmy.

Gakane hesitated, then decided to give him some honest advice while stroking the boy's head.

"Just because you exhibit a second gender manifestation doesn't mean you have to grow taller, and just because you get bigger doesn't mean you become an adult. Your parents are wise people, they'll surely be okay. So don't worry, and if you're truly concerned, talk to the Commander or Yuder. They'll definitely help you. Ah, and of course, I will as well. How about we stop by your village on our way back?"

"That's okay."

"Don't you want to see your parents? Didn't you say it's only a few hours from here? A slight change in schedule shouldn't be too much trouble, so tell me honestly."

"No, really, I'm totally fine."

Jimmy, who quickly shook his head, looked up at Gakane with an awkward smile after a moment.

"Thank you for not saying that my worries are too childish, Gakane."

"You can act more like a child if you want. It would've been nice if my siblings were even half as mature as you."

As Gakane deliberately sighed deeply, Jimmy's eyes widened in surprise at his unexpected words.

"You have siblings?"

"Yeah, I have five of them."

"Wow! I'm an only child, so I've never known what it's like to have siblings."

"It's not as great as you think. It's incredibly noisy, and they fight all the time. There's never a moment of peace."

Gakane thought about his younger siblings who would be at home by now. He hadn't seen their familiar faces this vacation, but he was okay because he knew he would see them eventually.

"That sounds like the Cavalry's atmosphere."

At Jimmy's words, Gakane chuckled.

"Indeed, it's not so different from the Cavalry."

"I wonder what Yuder is like? Does Yuder have any siblings?"

"Yuder?"

"You know, right? You're the closest with Yuder."

The conversation had suddenly veered towards Yuder, but seeing Jimmy's sparkling eyes, Gakane soon acquiesced.

Throughout this mission, Jimmy had been completely enthralled by Yuder's strong appearance. It seemed natural to want to know more about Yuder, given his behaviour, which was much like a puppy following its master.

'Closest with Yuder... I'm grateful if that's how it seems.'

Gakane honestly wasn't sure if they were as close as it seemed. In Gakane's eyes, Yuder was a mysterious figure with deep eyes that made it hard to guess his age.

Yuder hardly ever spoke about himself, and he was extremely reticent, always appearing like a solitary figure amongst the crowd.

Despite this, it was strangely inevitable that he attracted other people's attention, possessing an overwhelming strength. It was only natural that he first earned the admiration and envy of others.

Of course, it changed after it was known that he was a considerate person who didn't hesitate to risk danger for the sake of the Cavalry. But still, Yuder was a mysterious person.

Despite being of humble origin, he had no hesitation in leading others, his power was so strong it was terrifying to even question the extent of his abilities. Could such power really come from a young man who was only 20 years old?

If Kishiar La Orr was someone who felt like a being above humans created by the gods from birth, then Yuder was different in another way. Yuder Aile was essentially a manifestation of the 'strength' that Gakane had long desired.

Because of this, Gakane was fascinated and held a strong interest in Yuder.

Although Yuder didn't seem to show more interest in Gakane than he did in others, it seemed like he didn't dislike him either, and that was fine. Gakane considered himself to be quite persistent.

"Yuder probably doesn't have any siblings. That's what I've heard."

"I see. There is a similarity between Yuder and me."

Jimmy, who was smiling happily, suddenly looked out of the window and then suddenly got up.

"Eh? Gakane, over there... People are coming out and pointing at something?"

"What?"

Gakane also immediately got up from his seat and headed towards the window. Just as Jimmy had said, the villagers of Hartan, who had been going about their business all day, were gathered around the castle pointing and looking at something.

Gakane realized that their gazes were not directed at the castle but something beyond it and felt an odd sensation.

'Could it be?'

At that moment, someone pounded fiercely on the door of the room they were in.

"Is anyone in there?"

"What's the matter?"

"A fire. A big fire has started in the back mountain! It's similar to the one Devran caused!"

The one who was pounding the door was a young servant. Seeing his terrified face, Gakane rushed out of the room.

From the window of their room, they could look down on the village, but they couldn't see the mountain on the opposite side of the castle. When they went out to the corridor and looked out the opposite window, there indeed was a massive pillar of fire shooting up from the mountain.

Seeing the maids and servants from the castle all gathered together trembling in fear, Gakane grabbed one of them and asked.

"When did that fire start?"

"J-, Just now."

"Where is Lord Zakail now?"

"He's gone out with the guards!"

The fact that Zakail had gone out with the guards meant that he too hadn't anticipated this situation. Gakane said he understood and turned to look at Jimmy who had followed him.

"Jimmy. Let's go."

"Do you think that fire is a signal from Yuder?"

Jimmy asked in a voice so soft that only Gakane could hear.

"I'm not sure yet. But it's clear that something has happened. Did you bring your practice sword?"

"Yes."

Jimmy showed the small practice sword he had on his waist with a stern face.

"Good. Come here."

Gakane lifted Jimmy with one hand and summoned his shadow clone. The servants who saw the black shadow rising from beneath his feet started screaming and running away.

"It's a monster!"

"A monster, huh? That's harsh."

Turning

Chapter 90

"A monster, huh? That's harsh."

Gakane grumbled lightly, maneuvering his shadow clone. The shadow clone, carrying the lightweight Gakane who held Jimmy, hurtled fearlessly towards the open window.

"Ah!"

Jimmy screamed at the sensation of falling, but what followed the thud wasn't pain or shock. The shadow clone carrying them had landed on the ground as gently as a whisper.

"Gakane, next time give me a heads up before doing something like that!"

"Sorry. I forgot in the rush."

Gakane had learned during his hellish training with Yuder that such feats were possible with his shadow clone. The shadow clone, being almost impervious to the shock of falling from great heights, proved to be a far better mode of descent from a tall castle than physically scaling it down.

"Let's run."

They raced breathlessly towards the hill behind the castle. The hill was quite large and deep, but it wasn't difficult to locate the column of fire visible even from within the castle.

When they finally arrived at the source of the fire, the scene that Gakane and Jimmy encountered was of two groups standing off against each other.

One side consisted mostly of injured individuals in tattered clothes, while the other side was made up of well-armored guards led by a young nobleman, all armed and ready for battle.

The two groups, weapons drawn and poised for battle, suddenly halted upon spotting Gakane and Jimmy. The first to welcome them was a burly man from the injured group.

"You're Jimmy, aren't you? Of course! And the one with you must be Gakane!"

"De, Devran? What happened to your face!"

Jimmy exclaimed in shock at the sight of Devran, whose face was unrecognizable due to the numerous wounds. However, Devran just smiled broadly.

"A small price to pay for survival! I'm fine. In fact, I'm feeling great right now. Hahaha."

"Devran! Where have you been all this time? And who are these people with you?"

At Gakane's shout, Devran pointed at the guardsmen, their weapons aimed at him.

"That despicable noble tried to frame and sell me out. These friends next to me were captured for the same reason. They're all Awakeners. And these here are my family."

"Family?"

Just as Devran said, a man resembling him, an older man, and a young woman supporting him stood by his side. It was easy to guess from their faces alone that the three were family.

'So the family Devran was said to have killed was alive all along. Then that means...'

As Gakane's gaze shifted towards Zakail, who stood behind the guards, Zakail, his eyes burning with rage, shouted loudly.

"Do you believe that? It's all lies!"

"But Lord Zakail...."

The guardsmen, who were holding their weapons aimed at Devran, his family, and the escaped Awakeners at Zakail's command, had expressions of utter despair.

Even if they ostracized the Awakeners, these were people who had lived as neighbors in a small village for a long time. Contrary to Zakail's words, they knew perfectly well that the people in front of them were the real Devran and his family.

"If Devran didn't kill his family, then perhaps he didn't start the fire either. Since he has returned, at the very least, we should hear what happened...."

One of the guards aiming his spear murmured in a low voice. His words might have seemed reasonable to anyone else, but not to Zakail. Enraged, Zakail unsheathed the sword he'd brought with him and pointed it at the guard's neck, yelling furiously.

"Trying to sympathize with a murderer, you're no doubt a criminal too!"

"No, that's not it!"

The guard, his throat at the tip of Zakail's sword, turned pale and bowed his head.

"I have nothing to say to the bastard who killed my father and sister! Arrest those scoundrels now!"

"Uh... understood."

However, the guards couldn't muster the courage to step forward. They were paralyzed with fear, staring at Devran who was stirring up a storm, and the Awakeners standing next to him, showcasing their powers as if to make a point. The tension between the two sides intensified.

And Gakane, who had assessed the situation up until then, acted swiftly and concisely.

"Devran. Need some help?"

Standing between the two groups, Gakane spoke softly to Devran, drawing everyone's attention.

"It seems like you guys don't really want to fight, and we just need to deal with this young master. Isn't that right?"

"That's true, but what do you plan on doing?"

Devran asked with a puzzled look.

"Just this."

"What are those guys talking about...! Ack!"

Zakail, who had been watching Gakane and Devran's conversation with a stupefied look, suddenly screamed. Gakane's shadow clone, which had quietly extended to right behind Zakail during their confrontation, abruptly rose, gripping Zakail by the collar and lifting him off the ground.

"Ugh! What is this monster! Let me go! I said let me go!"

"Master Zakail!"

The guards, who had only been on alert against Devran and the Awakeners, spun around in a panic. But no one dared approach the flailing Zakail who was now suspended in mid-air.

Seizing this opportunity, Jimmy, moving towards Gakane's shadow clone, unsheathed his sword. His energy, appearing like a blue blade, was aimed at Zakail's face, causing the screams of terror to grow louder.

"Th-that sword energy! From such a kid!"

"That child, don't tell me he's the nearby Awakener...!"

"Now, Young Master. Tell your guards to step back and let's have a chat, shall we?"

While holding the terrified Zakail in the shadow clone's grip, Gakane flashed a gentle smile. That smile, to the eyes of the guards and Zakail, looked devilish.

"If you refuse, you'll get to see Jimmy's sword skills. Aren't you curious about how far he can go with that? Just a graze can slice off a limb, they say."

"Ah, ah...!"

All those present, who were just ordinary people who had never even seen a Swordmaster or a knight who could handle aura in their lifetime, were completely shaken. The sword energy Jimmy displayed before these guards was akin to a calamity. Zakail, who had secretly scorned these people dispatched from the Cavalry, felt the same.

Staring at the quivering sword energy close to his face, Zakail gritted his teeth and managed to open his trembling lips to speak.

"E-everyone, step back."

"But, Young Master!"

"Step back if I tell you to step back! Or do you want to die in my stead!"

Responding to the harsh call, the guards began to reluctantly step back. Only when they had retreated far enough that they could barely hear the conversation taking place did Gakane gesture to Jimmy to sheathe his sword.

Then, at last, Devran extinguished the enormous pillar of fire that still raged. Unlike the traces of fire that had blackened the entire village, there was no sign left where Devran's fire had been extinguished.

"So, the remnants of the fire in the village weren't your doing. Right?"

"Of course not."

Devran, who had briskly answered Gakane's question, glared at Zakail as he moved closer to Gakane.

"What on earth happened? Escaping all the way here and suddenly starting a fire, what was that all about?"

"I just did as Yuder ordered. He saved us all. He said to go out and start a fire so you guys would get the signal and call you out."

"Yuder?"

Gakane, whose eyes widened slightly, then examined the faces of those behind Devran. But he could not find the familiar face.

"But why can't I see Yuder?"

"That guy said he had things to do and let us go first. I think he plans to come after he takes out all those damned bastards over there."

Gakane was about to ask who those damned bastards Devran spat out with a face full of hatred were, but he refrained. It was a fact that would be known when Yuder returned.

"So, the guy who was with Yuder stayed too?"

"There was one stranger I've never seen before."

"Okay. Is Yuder's message just to join us?"

"No. He said to immediately inform the Commander about what happened here, and to return the way we came from Hartan."

"...Escape?"

To go back the way they came. When and where was Yuder planning to join them? Gakane was slightly worried, but he decided to trust Yuder's abilities and judgement.

With Yuder not here, he would have to move everyone including Devran. There was no time to waste.

"Alright. If the Commander's assistant said so, we should follow his command. All of you, we will need to move quite a bit, are you all okay?"

At Gakane's question, the Awakeners behind all shouted out in unison that they were fine. Although they were all injured like Devran, their faces were incredibly bright. Since Yuder had saved them, their faith in the Cavalry seemed to pierce the sky.

However, only Zakail, who was tightly grasping Gakane's shadow clone, couldn't rejoice. He quickly realized that a very bad situation was occurring as he listened to the ongoing conversation.

Devran, who had been sent to Apeto's Family due to their interest, had safely escaped, and the one who saved them was apparently going to finish things up there.

It sounded absurd, but with the prisoners alive right before his eyes, there was no choice but to believe.

'Damn Apeto bastards. After acting so confidently, what on earth did you do!'