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Chapter 211

The trial between the Cavalry, including Duke Peletta and the Apeto Ducal House ended in defeat for the Apeto, just as many had predicted. However, the resulting storm that it stirred was beyond anyone's expectations.

The Apeto House, having braced for merely a blow to their pride if they were to lose, was slapped with an astronomical fine and the confiscation of about one-third of their official assets. Dozens of involved parties were sentenced to exile or imprisonment, having been judged guilty. Even those who were seen as indirect accomplices received relatively light punishments, their numbers reaching nearly hundreds.

The Duke of Apeto naturally resisted these penalties, but the onslaught from Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar was as if they had anticipated every possible move. As the Duke hesitated, unsure whether he should swallow his pride and seek help from other ducal houses, those siding with the Emperor engaged in 'conversation' with those members and followers of the House of Apeto.

Thanks to a fiery temperament that ran in their family, there were few in the Apeto House who possessed deep loyalty to begin with. Those who followed out of a lust for money or fear, willingly accepted the offer to lighten their own charges in exchange for testifying against the crimes of the Apeto.

While one traitor could be easily dealt with, it became impossible to handle when dozens, then hundreds began to speak out. Thus, the massive limbs of the Apeto House were swiftly severed, one by one, starting from the edges.

By the time the Duke of Apeto came to his senses, everything was already over. On the surface, it seemed like the Duke and the key members of his family had escaped punishment, but they were no more than a torso left without limbs.

Furthermore, the situation worsened when evidence emerged showing that the Duke, who had been consistently asserting his innocence, had in fact been supporting Beltrail directly. The Duke's escape from punishment, despite being responsible for his house, attracted a torrent of criticism and resentment. The numerous rumors related to Beltrail's record exposed during the initial trial also

humiliated the Apeto House. It was unbearable for those who held reputation, honor, and lineage above all else.

Another incident occurred amid such circumstances. An assassin infiltrated the Crown Prince's palace, which had been quiet for some time, leaving behind a suspicion that the true killer of Lenore Shand Apeto had been found. Fortunately, the Crown Prince was unharmed, but was wounded by a poison-coated dagger and was advised to rest for some time.

The assassin committed suicide immediately upon being captured, leaving no clue as to who had hired him. However, the flower symbol engraved on a badge in his possession, presumably intended to be left behind had the mission succeeded, became the topic of discussion among the populace.

The name of the flower was Dulacrul, a symbol of sorrow traditionally placed on a child's grave by grieving parents in the empire.

Duke Apeto claimed he did not order the act, but no one believed him. Duke Diarca, despite his nickname of the 'Old Raccoon', sent a formal letter of protest to Duke Apeto, in an anger that seemed uncharacteristic of him.

Whether this was the cause was unclear, but soon after, Duke Apeto collapsed, stricken by a disease he thought he had overcome in his youth. Unable to perform his duties as the pillar of the family, all his powers were transferred to his only remaining successor, the First Prince Aishes.

Aishes, having grasped the power he had long desired, promptly embarked on a ruthless campaign to rid his faction of those who had rebelled against his father. Those who had maliciously predicted his weak constitution would render him incapable of leading the House began to fall one by one, largely due to the disgrace they had brought upon the family in such a short span of time.

Most people who were unaware of the full situation praised the fact that Aishes, the sole heir who had faithfully retained his position throughout the family's scandals, had assumed the leadership of the House, stating it was indeed a fortunate event.

All the while, Yuder Aile watched the unfolding changes from a step behind, his keen gaze concealed as he silently observed.

Yuder climbed to the fifth floor and knocked on the Commander's office door. Shortly thereafter, the door opened, revealing Nathan Zuckerman's face. The tall man with blonde hair who was usually present was nowhere to be seen inside the office.

With a practiced hand, Yuder picked up the pile of letters strewn across the desk and spoke.

"Has the Commander not risen yet today?"

"Yes."

In the short period when the world was rapidly changing without a moment's rest, Kishiar also reached the 'cycle' as he had previously predicted. He was often actively leading and encouraging those involved until the trial of the Apeto family was nearly concluded. However, for the past few days, he was rarely seen outside.

'Back then, he would at least be up early in the office...'

Today marked the third day since it became increasingly hard to catch a glimpse of him, even in his office.

'I wonder if he's still here.'

What does it feel like to forcibly expel the overflowing energy within your body? Despite hearing about it, he couldn't easily imagine it because he had never experienced it himself. Kishiar hadn't sought out Yuder, so he had refrained from speaking, but at this point, he was slightly worried.

The once busy office, always filled with a man who seemed to be constantly working, now appeared deceptively vacant, with only the ever-burning stove serving as a steady source of light. After a fleeting glance at the divine sword Orr, placed on the stove, Yuder sat down at a small desk near the Commander's table and began his work. Ever since the festival period and the business holiday due to the manifestation had ended, he had been fully committed to the task of sorting letters.

Reading all the letters that had arrived for Kishiar, categorizing them, and picking out the most urgent ones was not a difficult task, but it was rather time-consuming.

'Most of them are invitations today...'

However, thanks to the enhanced reputation of the Cavalry, there had been no rude requests since the festival to send an Awakener to be used as a clown, or to arrange a meeting with a young and beautiful Awakener for some pointless purpose.

Yuder quickly went through all the letters, setting aside those that were not party invitations or unilateral love letters to Kishiar. This alone reduced the pile by about eighty percent.

Just as he was about to start reading the remaining letters in earnest, Nathan Zuckerman, who had disappeared into the office earlier, returned with a cup of tea and set it beside him. Accompanying the tea was a mountainous assortment of chocolates.

"Please, help yourself."

"..."

Yuder lifted his gaze from the mountain of chocolate, focusing on Nathan. Nathan had provided him with five slices of cake just yesterday, and the day before, he presented cookies of various hues smeared with jam. No matter how many times Yuder told him that it was unnecessary, Nathan's terse reply was always, "I'm just following orders."

"Did the Commander order you to give me these, too?"

"Yes."

Seeing Nathan's commitment to following orders daily, Yuder could only find the situation peculiar. It was as if he was going through this routine for the first time, and he wasn't sure whether it seemed normal to Kishiar as well.

Yuder glanced at Nathan, wondering if he had anything else to say about Kishiar, but Nathan's expression was as impassive as ever.

"Please wait a moment."

Eventually, Yuder called out to Nathan just before he turned and disappeared.

"It seems too much for me to eat alone. Would you care to join me?"

"I thought the quantity was just enough for you to finish..."

Nathan's gaze drifted toward the pile of chocolates. Yuder recalled the dessert plates that Nathan had silently emptied in the past, and after a moment of silence, he spoke again.

"...There's something I'd like to ask."

"Understood."

Finally, Nathan took a seat across from him. He didn't touch the tea or chocolate, instead maintaining a knightly posture and gazing at Yuder.

"Do you have any questions?"

"When Kishiar's cycle was approaching, and I asked if there was anything else I needed to be mindful of, you told me there was nothing to worry about."

That conversation occurred when Yuder was restarting his duty of sorting through the correspondence. Nathan had said that it was a routine that was already familiar to Kishiar and him, and that there was no need for others to be overly cautious.

"Yes."

"So, is this also normal?"

"If you're referring to being excessively sleepy and distancing yourself from others... Yes. It's quite common."

Becoming excessively sleepy and distancing oneself. Yuder digested this piece of information and nodded.

"I see. Understood."

If it was something that had already occurred in the past, then there was no need to worry excessively. Yuder realized this was just the first time in this lifetime he was experiencing such a situation. In his past life, he had grown accustomed to Kishiar disappearing for days at a time without a trace.

Kishiar had already explained and warned him about the impending cycle. Not just to Yuder, but everyone around him. If everyone was being distanced, there was no particular need to worry.

Just as he was lost in his thoughts, Nathan unexpectedly asked a question.

"...Are you worried?"

"Of course, I am worried. I have heard about it, but this is my first time experiencing it."

If something were to happen to Kishiar, it would also impact the new future chosen by Yuder Aile. Kishiar's existence itself was synonymous with the future.

Upon hearing Yuder's reply, Nathan's lips pressed together firmly.

"That's surprising."

It was a while before Yuder turned his head towards Nathan, who had finally spoken. Nathan was looking at Yuder, his eyes a mix of curiosity and some inexplicable emotion.

"Did you think I wasn't worried about the Commander at all?"

"To be honest... It seemed that way."

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To express vague worries would only invite danger in return. There was no need to make a fuss every day just because one was worried. Yuder had merely been waiting in silence, but it seemed that his demeanor appeared extremely calm to others. He recalled a particularly serene expression on his face and absently stroked his chin.

"When I heard the Commander's words, I assumed that this cycle would end quickly. But isn't it lasting far longer than expected?"

"Indeed, it is lasting quite long this time."

Nathan Zuckerman nodded in agreement.

"Yet it still hasn't surpassed the longest duration."

"What was the longest period?"

"One month. It was two years ago."

Two years ago. Around the same time that Kishiar had awakened. Yuder could not even begin to imagine Kishiar of that era, who he only knew from stories, and who he could never truly know. Giving up on this fruitless effort, Yuder raised his head. Nathan Zuckerman was still sitting upright, looking straight ahead.

"Does the cycle lengthen when his physical condition is poor?"

"No. Rather than that..."

Nathan Zuckerman's words trailed off, and his eyes darkened.

"It is known to lengthen when the power does not dissipate properly."

"Dissipation, you mean..."

Yuder recalled the small potion Kishiar had shown him.

"Isn't that why he drinks the potion? That's what I heard... But even after taking the potion, are there times when the dissipation is particularly good or bad?"

Nathan Zuckerman did not immediately answer. Just as Yuder was about to give up on waiting for his response, a soft, low voice resonated in the room.

"That is..."

"Oh, you're already here."

At that moment, the aura in the inner hallway surged, and Kishiar appeared. The man, who usually kept his aura well suppressed, was releasing it so much today that it could be felt from afar. He was, as always, dressed in a white uniform. Yuder was captivated by Kishiar's beautiful face, which looked freshly washed and still damp. His appearance was already eye-catching, but today the combination of dampness and languor made him even more devastating.

"You're here."

Nathan Zuckerman promptly rose from his seat and bowed. After Yuder also stood and greeted him, Kishiar's gaze moved towards the desk. He scanned over the classified pile of letters, the pile of chocolates on the tray, and the single cup of tea, before his red eyes returned to Yuder.

"Were you two chatting?"

"Sir Aile had a question, so we were briefly engaged in conversation."

"It seems you've become quite friendly in my absence. I feel a bit jealous, Nathan."

"..."

Where in this cold silence could there be jealousy? Yuder read from Nathan Zuckerman's silence that he shared the same thought.

"Was there anything urgent to confirm while I was asleep?"

"Nothing urgent. The sequential tasks are over there for your review."

As Kishiar's adjutant, Nathan Zuckerman primarily handled the communications related to Kishiar's territory of Peletta, but that was not all. Besides managing Peletta's Knights, he received all sorts of secret communications through various channels when Kishiar was absent. Seeing how he managed to handle such a volume of work while also attending to Kishiar, Yuder couldn't help but admire him.

'He might have done something else as well...'

Kishiar, who slowly approached the desk, skimmed through the piles of paper laid upon it. As he unrolled the scroll on top, he suddenly froze his fingertips.

"Beltrail Shand Apeto is critically ill."

"Wasn't he imprisoned in the Regien Tower?"

"It seems someone poisoned his food. It's unlikely he'll survive today - perhaps he's already departed for the long journey."

While countless individuals paid their penalties from the House of Apeto, Beltrail, naturally the greatest sinner of them all, also faced his judgment. He was stripped of his entire fortune and sentenced to 15 years in prison, leading him to Regien Tower, where most noble criminals were incarcerated.

In reality, the grand judges aligned with the Emperor argued that he should be imprisoned in the most remote land at the edge of the empire. However, the opinion of the House of Apeto that the punishment was too severe for someone of unstable mind was accepted, and instead, an agreement was reached with the confiscation of his property. He was to be sent to the Regien Tower within the capital.

The result of his punishment became the significant standard to conclude all the matters surrounding the House of Apeto. It was a victory for the Emperor and Kishiar, publicized far and wide.

Kishiar did not personally attend it, but Yuder saw with his own eyes how the people of Hartan who returned after witnessing the verdict, the Awakeners who had suffered, and Devran rejoiced. He recalled their faces when they finally returned to their homeland after Beltrail's trial, as if they were finally free from their pent-up resentment and anger.

If those who had left quietly in the middle of the night, so as not to bother Kishiar any further, heard this news, what would they think?

Without a doubt, it was a job well done. However, Yuder had to think about what was next. He moved to Kishiar's side and opened his mouth.

"Has it been determined who did it?"

"Of course, there's no evidence. But circumstantially, it's probably Aishes Shand Apeto."

Aishes. If he, who now took control of the family, had wished to eliminate Beltrail, it was completely possible. After all, having him alive wouldn't bring any benefit to the future of the House of Apeto.

"So the first son has officially made his move."

"Yes. The Duke of Apeto is trying to defend, but the Duke still hasn't woken up. It'll be tough for a while. I'm curious about who will win."

Kishiar, who said this, looked much better than he had yesterday. There was no comparison since yesterday Yuder had only seen him when he had finished his work.

Yuder looked at his face and naturally responded.

"Whichever of the two wins, there should be no harm to you, Commander."

"I'm trying to make sure that's the case."

"And so it will be."

Regardless of who won, the future of Duke Apeto was dark, and Aishes wouldn't be able to beat his frail body.

Kishiar chuckled lightly.

"Your assurance is as strong as if you've seen the future."

Yuder paused for a moment but quickly regained his composure.

"Well... my prediction is that the first son will win in the end. Once he takes over the Duke's position, we'll have to wait and see what happens next."

As he muttered, Kishiar slumped into his chair and let out a long breath.

"Nathan, could you make me a cup of tea?"

"Of course. Is there anything else you need?"

Kishiar shook his head.

"Just wait a moment, please."

Nathan Zuckerman, who had nodded to Yuder, left the Commander's office. Kishiar beckoned Yuder closer with a gesture of his hand.

"How have things been lately? It's been hard to check in since I haven't been able to get out."

"Everyone is training diligently. Their morale has risen since the trial of the House of Apeto..."

At Yuder's response, Kishiar suddenly wore an odd expression. Yuder stopped mid-sentence and blinked.

"...Wasn't that what you asked about?"

"No. I was curious about that too. But what I asked about..."

Kishiar trailed off, chuckling weakly as if he found his own question amusing. His red eyes softened.

"...was about you."

Something in Yuder's chest felt tight. He could feel the atmosphere subtly shift.

Unintentionally, his gaze fell to Kishiar's lips before dropping away. Looking at his smile was, for some reason, difficult.

"I am, of course, well. You saw me yesterday, didn't you?"

"That was brief."

"..."

"Very brief."

Nothing had changed since they had admitted their attraction and shared a kiss. Despite the trials they had faced, including the first conflict with the House of Apeto and Kishiar's constant struggles with his own body, Kishiar's attitude towards Yuder had remained unchanged. The only shift was a subtle change in how he addressed him.

Whenever their faces brushed past each other in passing or they locked eyes during conversations about work, the intensity of his gaze was warm yet fierce. It was incredibly difficult to ignore such a powerful pull, strong enough to make one forget the presence of others.

Time and space seemed to melt away in his presence. It had been like this before, but now it was even more intense. Once Yuder looked at him, it was impossible to look away. That precarious feeling was subtly knocking at the back of his mind now.

"Is your work for today done?"

"No, I've just finished sorting."

"That's good."

Not understanding what he meant by 'good', Yuder looked at Kishiar who was smiling at him.

"Then you can stay here a bit longer."

"...Do you want me to stay here longer?"

"If possible."

His answer was light, almost joking, but it could have been serious. Yuder hesitated, unsure of how to respond, before cautiously opening his mouth.

"I will try."

"How?"

His languid voice asked, seemingly teasing.

"Why don't you give me more tasks to do here, Commander?"

Yuder thought this was a pretty good response. However, Kishiar's red eyes, holding a deeper heat than usual, seemed to disagree. He soon tilted his head and spoke, a smile playing on his lips.

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"Yuder, I hear you've been training at dawn with Ever Beck lately."

"Yes?"

"Did you start with a particular goal in mind? If so, is it going well?"

"Ah... yes."

Taken aback by the sudden change in topic, Yuder nodded. These days, as he'd asked, he was training with Ever every morning. Although they called it 'training', it was essentially observing the flow of Ever's power as she exercised it, and it turned out to be more interesting than expected.

Ever was clumsier than her previous life that Yuder knew of, but her power control was undeniably more delicate compared to other Awakeners. Yuder's current goal was to learn that technique and apply it to himself.

However, he hadn't expected Kishiar to bring up the topic abruptly, and it took him a while to understand the implication and respond.

"Ever is currently the most proficient among us in controlling small units of power. I am getting her help as I am somewhat clumsy in that area."

"Thais Yulman and his apprentice are continually assisting you as well."

Kishiar changed the topic again.

After the underground lab incident, Thais Yulman had moved his research lab at the order of Kishiar. His new lab was a warehouse building within the Imperial Knight, a short distance from the Cavalry. Despite the fatigue from moving his belongings over several days, he seemed even more ecstatic than ever, tirelessly planning his future research.

His apprentice, Alik, was training his awakened water control abilities while assisting his master. Every time Yuder visited, Alik would fervently bombard him with questions, leading to hours-long conversations if he got a hold of him.

In truth, the total amount of water Alik could summon was barely enough to fill a cup, so it couldn't be deemed powerful. However, his development speed surpassed any other member, perhaps due to his experience of watching mages wielding elemental magic over his shoulder. Because of this, Yuder had high expectations for him.

Combining all that, Yuder responded in a word, "Yes, it's my duty."

"Aren't you also frequenting the medical division, monitoring the training of the Deputy Commanders, and investigating the two Awakeners who belong to the Star of Nagran?"

"...Yes."

'Why would he ask how I've been when he seems to know more about my routine than I do?'

Kishiar laughed a bit more deeply at Yuder's awkward response that seemed to contain that question.

"And yet, you're asking for more tasks. Are you serious?"

"I wouldn't mind having even more tasks than now."

"A typical answer from Yuder Aile. But I didn't bring this up to watch you suffer from overworking."

Suddenly, Yuder felt a formless energy drawing his body. He slightly turned his head. Although it was invisible to the eye, an energy that had filled the Commander's office was now fluctuating in the air.

'This is...'

It was Kishiar's energy. He could tell right away. The unrestrained energies, in sync with their master's will, freely fluctuated in a rather fierce manner, circling around Yuder. Yuder watched Kishiar while trying not to be distracted by that energy.

"But isn't that the best way?"

"There is a simpler alternative."

What else could keep him longer in the Commander's office besides work? As Yuder frowned slightly, Kishiar whispered in a voice so sweet that it made his heart flutter.

"When you wish to stay, stay for as long as you like."

"..."

"What do you think?"

Even if he tried to consider it casually, he could immediately understand that the implied meaning was far from ordinary. Seeing the face tinted with the blatant color of desire, seemingly expecting a response, thirst reflexively sprang forth within Yuder. His mouth began to dry, but he swallowed hard, struggling to suppress that heat.

"...I will keep that in mind."

"Just keep it in mind?"

The precarious atmosphere felt more potent today, probably because of the unrestrained aura that Kishiar exuded. Reason warned him not to be swept away by such a formidable force.

"I will also make an effort."

"Well, you won't be swayed easily."

Kishiar smiled slightly, a twinkle in his eyes. Not knowing why he found it amusing, Kishiar laughed softly for a while before leaning back in his chair, exhaling deeply.

A few moments later, only a deep gaze remained in the place where the laughter had faded, and silence followed. Kishiar, staring as if piercing Yuder's innermost thoughts with his red eyes, opened his mouth.

"Were you not upset that I haven't been around much?"

Yuder suddenly wondered if this was what Kishiar had wanted to ask him all along. He couldn't be sure, but it felt like that.

"I was fine... but."

As he continued, Yuder noticed the peculiar look in Kishiar's eyes and quickly changed his words.

"When I heard from Sir Zuckerman earlier, he mentioned that your cycle has been longer this time. I was quite worried about that."

"So that's what you were discussing with Nathan."

Finally, it seemed that the mystery was resolved. Kishiar nodded slowly.

"There's no need to worry. This cycle being longer is simply because I've been trying to release my energy in the most natural way, doing nothing in particular. Despite how Nathan may seem, he worries a lot, and sometimes sees situations too negatively."

So the lengthening of his cycle was due to a natural release of energy, did that mean he had been expelling it in some other way before? The phrasing was odd, but it would be strange to probe further. After hesitating for a moment, Yuder asked briefly.

"But are you okay?"

"I have to make sure I am."

There was a glimmer of heat in Kishiar's gentle gaze.

"Having discovered the truth, I don't want to cover my eyes with other things and live in vain."

He didn't understand what that meant, but for some reason, seeing Kishiar so exhilarated made him feel alright. His skin prickled where the gaze full of warmth landed.

Yuder swallowed, as if shaking off the sensation that seemed to crawl up his spine.

"Understood... If there's anything I can do to help, please let me know."

"I want to touch."

The sudden remark changed the atmosphere again. As Yuder's mouth fell open as if he was about to question, 'what?', Kishiar repeated his statement.

"I really want to touch."

"What do you mean?"

Yuder questioned, but he already knew the answer. His gaze was fixed on his face; he couldn't feign ignorance even if he wanted to. A moment later, as if to ask whether he really didn't understand, Kishiar raised his hand slightly, a secret smile creeping up the corners of his mouth, and his premonition turned into a complete certainty.

'Why such pointless acts...'

He found himself unable to tear his eyes away, as if the spectacle before him was verging on the obscene. How he wished he could brush it off and flee as easily as in the past, when he saw the man as nothing more than a pesky serpent. But those days were long gone.

"...Where would you like it to be?"

"Are you really going to let me touch you?"

A heavy murmur broke the silence, yielding an unexpected reaction, as though the proposition had never been anticipated.

"As long as it doesn't cross any inappropriate boundaries, it should be fine."

"Inappropriate, huh?"

Kishiar shot a question back at Yuder, who was gently nodding, as if to confirm the boundaries.

"Can I... touch your hair?"

"Yes."

"And your hand?"

"Yes."

"Can I touch your cheek as well? What about your ear?"

"...Yes."

It felt ridiculous to check each point, but Yuder answered nonetheless.

"Hmm. How about, here?"

Kishiar lightly tapped the area below his own lips with his index finger, a playful smile in his eyes.

"...Are you sorry, or were you planning on mocking me from the start?"

"Ha-ha-ha."

Chilled by the reply, Kishiar suddenly hid half his face, bursting into a gleeful laughter. Yuder, about to retort, instead stood stupefied, staring blankly at his face.

Perhaps a flower blooming and melting under the warm sunlight was akin to this moment.

Despite having seen Kishiar La Orr's smiling face countless times before, Yuder realized he had never witnessed such an expression. The recognition surfaced fleetingly in his mind before quickly dissipating. The laugh of a man he thought he knew so well seemed foreign, something never seen before, and it pierced deep into Yuder's heart.

"I'm sorry. I do want to touch you, but I can't right now."

"I'm afraid once I touch you, I won't be able to stop."

His bittersweet muttering, tainted with laughter, echoed in Yuder's ears. It was only after these words settled did Yuder manage to blink and return to his senses.

"It's such a shame, given you had even given permission."

"..."

"Your Grace, your tea is ready....."

Yuder, who should have responded but couldn't muster a thought, was fortunate that Nathan Zuckerman returned at just the right moment. Seeing the remnants of Kishiar's laughter on his face, Nathan paused momentarily, then glanced briefly at Yuder.

"Did something happen?"

"Just a very cute incident. Want to know?"

Despite Kishiar's jesting remark, Nathan showed no reaction. Having dealt with Kishiar's teasing numerous times before, Nathan placed the teapot and cups on the table with an unchanging stoic expression. This allowed Yuder to regain his composure.

"I'll finish the rest of my tasks, then."

"Do so."

Kishiar waved a hand in dismissal, still smiling. Yuder quickly returned to his seat, pulling the letters he had sorted towards him. His intention was to read them all as quickly as possible and leave, but the gaze on the side of his face was quite unnerving.

'This is a letter from the Imperial Mages. This one looks like it's about the costs incurred from summoning those people for the trial... and this one too. And this is...?'

His gaze, moving at top speed to decipher the words, suddenly halted at one point. Yuder frowned as he held two letters, staring at the characters written on their fronts.

'One is from the Commander of the Imperial Knights, Theorado Van Tain. And the other from the Second Prince Ejain Afnan of Nelarn. Both of them, request letters.'

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At a glance, both letters were far from ordinary. The unrest that Yuder had felt due to his conversation with Kishiar moments ago swiftly subsided. With a steady hand, he first unsealed the request from Theorado Van Tain.

The letter, sent ostensibly to the beloved Duke Peletta, commenced with a friendly preamble. Though it wasn't long, the content was anything but mundane as expected.

Perhaps Your Grace, Duke Peletta, has come to know about the frequent monster appearances beyond the western border of the empire lately. Despite it being much earlier than usual, multiple hordes of monsters numbering in the hundreds have been observed, and in the western surrounding nations, including Durban, several nearby cities and towns have already suffered significant damage. This distressing information has come to our attention.

'...What is this?'

Yuder silently read on, pressing his lips together.

So far, the empire has not suffered significant damage, but it is uncertain whether this will continue to be the case. We, the Tain family, who have defended the western lands of the empire for generations, are considering advancing our monster subjugation plans. If Your Grace, the Duke Peletta, who brilliantly led the Cavalry during the Harvest Festival, would consider this matter seriously and is willing to offer assistance, I request that you kindly reply to me.

The sudden surge of monsters in the west, much more than usual years, and the subjugation.

It was an all too familiar tale. Yuder looked at the letter and tried to recall his memories from his past life.

'Right. It's exactly like that time. But then... the timing was later than now.'

The same thing happened in his past life. However, by the time Yuder of that era learned about what was happening in the western part of the empire, the damage had already been done.

Several knight orders that headed there first suffered near-annihilation, and the empire's forces could not properly respond. This led the once-overlooked Cavalry to be pushed toward the west. It was the Cavalry's first official mission, which was anything but glorious.

Heading west burdened with heavy responsibility and without sufficient time to prepare, the Cavalry members somehow managed to convey news of their first glorious victory to the capital.

However, there was no time for celebration. The onslaught of monsters, which kept appearing no matter how many were slain, relentlessly continued whenever they let their guard down. Lowly sabotage and restraint aimed at the victorious Cavalry followed suit. Casualties were inevitable.

Even after Commander Kishiar personally entered the battlefield multiple times, it took more than three months to fully suppress the monsters. In the process, many of the original members were seriously injured or killed, including Gakane Bolunwald, which was highly respected within the group.

The Cavalry was greatly shaken by the incident. The voices of unrest grew louder as Kishiar, who had to stabilize the group, designated Yuder as his successor and frequently absented himself. The situation reached a peak of chaos when Emperor Keilusa also left the world around the same time. Many members who had believed and followed the Commander either defected or fled. The remaining members could never return to their previous lives.

Looking back, it was almost a miracle that the Cavalry was not disbanded then.

'I've been training the entire Cavalry so hard since I returned to prepare for this, but I didn't expect to get the information in this way.'

Even earlier than in his previous life, it happened through a letter from Theo, a member of the Tain Ducal House and also Imperial Knight Commander.

Yuder suspiciously glanced over the part that was labeled as the Tain Ducal House.

'To subjugate them in advance... sounds good. Excluding the fact that I don't think highly of their reason for wanting to do something they didn't do in their previous life.'

Although it was correct that since the main territory of the Tain Ducal House was in the west, it wasn't strange if they were worried about the news of monsters starting to break out from their homeland. But in his previous life, the Tain Ducal House was so reluctant to ask the Cavalry for help until monsters had encroached upon the very doorstep of their main territory.

If they really wanted to subjugate the monsters in advance, wouldn't it be easier and more convenient to hire mercenaries, or call for a group of knights with whom their family had ties, instead of asking for help from the newly formed Cavalry?

'Still, it would be easier to assume this is a trick aimed at putting pressure on the Cavalry and Kishiar's side.'

He would have ignored it if he didn't know what was going to happen in a few months, but this matter couldn't be ignored. Regardless of when it was going to be dealt with, the sooner, the better.

Yuder sighed, folding up the letter he had been glaring at.

'No matter what they do this time, they won't get away with it as easily as before. So it doesn't matter.'

But what really didn't sit well with him was that the plea for help was sent not by the Tain Duke himself, but by someone else.

Theorado Van Tain might be a member of the Tain Ducal House and Commander of the Imperial Knight, but in this matter, he was nothing more than a third party. If the Tain Ducal House and Commander Theo really sincerely wanted help, they should have at least made the effort to come directly to the Cavalry building. After all, the Imperial Knight and the Cavalry share the same premises.

The fact they didn't do so could only be interpreted as an intention to avoid stepping into the Cavalry building, including Kishiar, and even more so to avoid face-to-face interactions.

Even now, the Imperial Knights, who were under Theo, were ignoring the Cavalry members like bugs, disrespectfully passing by Kishiar without even a greeting. What more could be expected from such folks?

With a cold heart, Yuder unfolded the second letter sent by the second prince of Nelarn, Ejain. The main content was not long this time either. He first courteously explained who he was and revealed that he had stayed in the capital so far to further admire the culture of the empire, which he might not see again after the festival had ended and all other diplomats had returned home.

...The reason I am sending you this letter is straightforward. I originally planned to stay in the empire a bit longer, but due to unexpected circumstances, I will be returning to Nelarn soon. However, due to some somewhat dizzying political situations surrounding me, I find myself in a situation where I must depart with as few people as possible.

Ejain did not detail what the dizzying political situation was. Thanks to that, Yuder had to rummage through his memories for a while before recalling the information that Ejain was often threatened with his life by his brothers due to the exceptional abilities he demonstrated during his prince days in his previous life.

'I remember him becoming the king only after he had clearly sorted everything out after becoming an Awakener.'

Yuder continued to read the section below.

According to our sources, the number of monsters appearing in the western borderlands has increased dramatically of late. It's quite risky to leave the imperial border with a small group and head to a safe location for many reasons. Therefore, we requested if the emperor could grant us humanitarian assistance. In response, we were given the most gracious answer that a letter should be sent to His Grace the Duke of Peletta, who is in charge of the Cavalry.

Although it was written as humanitarian assistance on the surface, its true meaning aligned with the intention of Emperor Keilusa to firmly protect Prince Ejain by leveraging Kishiar. Knowing the succession battle taking place in Ejain's motherland, Nelarn, if the Emperor made such a decision, it was highly likely that a politically understanding conversation had been established between the prince who came as an envoy and the Emperor.

'... Perhaps the reason why Prince Ejain came to the Empire as an envoy in this dangerous time was for that purpose from the beginning.'

Ultimately, as Ejain would be the ultimate winner of Nelarn's throne, Emperor Keilusa's decision would turn out to be correct.

Yuder, with a sudden realization, folded the letter thinking that Emperor Keilusa too was a man with a perspective and sense that were too valuable to die early, just like his brother Kishiar.

As if he had been waiting for that, Kishiar's voice came from beside him.

"Your expression has been unusual while reading, what are these letters about?"

"These letters, it seems that Commander should see them and reply as soon as possible today."

"Is the content that urgent?"

Instead of explaining, Yuder got up and put the letters on Kishiar's desk. A moment later, Kishiar, having read all the letters, lifted his head with an absent smile.

"Interesting. Both of the letters are discussing the same monster incidents happening in the same region."

"Did you already know, Commander?"

"If you're talking about the information that a much larger number of monsters is appearing in the western borderlands compared to last year, yes, I did know."

An unsurprising response returned.

"How did you..."

"Do you remember? Before the festival, there was a letter where some lord from the west suddenly asked for help from the Cavalry to subdue the monsters that had appeared."

"That letter... Ah."

Just as he was about to ask when such a letter had arrived, a vague memory suddenly surfaced.

'Was it the day I first helped with the letter classification?'

The day he realized that the Cavalry's schedule, which he thought would be neglected all along, had completely changed due to a single letter, Yuder selected two letters he thought were rather normal from numerous ones. One was a letter sent from the imperial palace, and the other was the request that Kishiar mentioned.

"Thinking it was the first proper request letter, I eagerly checked and found it to be an extremely rude request from someone who thought it would be cheaper to have an awakened slave rather than to spend money on knights."

"...I see. I apologize."

Kishiar, who slightly shook his head as if saying it was okay to Yuder's apology, continued his speech with a calm face.

"Anyway, the only truth in that letter was the part about the monster appearances. But that was really strange. It's not the season for monsters to appear within the border now. So I ordered a few of the Peletta Knights to continuously survey the surrounding situation."

Turning

Chapter 215

Even amidst his busy schedule, he had consistently examined the situation in the West, all based on a tiny suspicion embedded within the rude letter. It was a skill beyond admiration, enough to send chills down his spine. Yuder blinked blankly for a moment before he managed to open his mouth.

"That's... really impressive."

"Impressive, what nonsense. I merely gave the orders. The loyal knights carried out the task."

"Are you saying that Sir Aile wouldn't believe it was real? Please clarify the whole process."

Suddenly, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing near Kishiar, interjected. Kishiar's previously laughing face subtly changed. Yuder, puzzled, turned to look at Nathan.

"What do you mean?"

"It's true that you dispatched our Peletta Knights to verify the truth of the contents of the request letter. But after you grasped the dark intentions of the local lord there, you didn't order an immediate return. Instead, you sent more people, not just because of the monsters that had appeared out of season..."

"Oh, Nathan, that's enough."

Kishiar interrupted Nathan's words. However, Yuder seemed to understand the rest of the cut-off sentence.

"Did you order them to sit there helplessly as a form of protest?"

"Something like that."

"It wasn't that direct, though."

Kishiar sighed, resignedly answering.

"Monsters are often referred to as a curse of the god, aren't they? If they really appeared at this time, it looked certain that it was the lord's fault, so I just asked them to stay and observe. It turned out that he was indeed extremely immoral."

"Thanks to that, the lord there is about to be anonymously reported with the evidence we collected and is scheduled to be tried in the capital. The unusual movement of the monsters compared to previous years was an incidental discovery, so we could say it was a secondary harvest."

Nathan spoke curtly. Kishiar narrowed his eyes and smiled contentedly.

"It's like we did some advance research."

"Do you know how hard it was for the rest of us knights, including myself, to deal with the absence of several people chasing after that swine during this busy time?"

It was only then that Yuder understood why the usually stoic knight had responded to his lord's words.

'So that's what it was.'

If they had to deal with reduced staff during the busy festival period due to an inconceivable reason, anyone would have been upset.

"You've ruined my chance to show off my skills in front of my respectful assistant because of you, Nathan. The momentum's gone."

"Sir Aile should also know the truth, shouldn't he?"

"If this issue causes my assistant to lose respect for me, you'll be responsible."

"... I believe you made a reasonable choice, sir."

At Yuder's response, Nathan and Kishiar simultaneously turned to look at him.

"Do you mean that sincerely, Sir Aile?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean you would have done the same?"

"Well, I'm not sure. If I had the authority to punish the fake request, I might have personally overturned their entire living area into a field."

Compared to that, how humane and rational was it to find evidence of immorality and hand it over for trial?

Nathan Zuckerman held his silence for a moment. Kishiar, who had opened his eyes slightly wider, burst into laughter. A knight's gaze, seeming to scrutinize Yuder's mind, swept over his face.

"...When Sir Aile speaks like that, it doesn't feel like a joke at all. It's as if you've done it before."

'He's quick-witted.'

In fact, Yuder had experienced similar events several times in his previous life. However, he could not reveal that fact and hence maintained his silence.

"Well, look. Even the assistant admitted I did well."

Fortunately, Kishiar, with a brazen face, intervened and changed the atmosphere. Yuder stepped back and watched as Kishiar and Nathan resumed their conversation.

The admiration he felt for Kishiar, who he thought had a more impressive predictive power than he did, having seen the future, had now faded. But in its place, his thoughts lingered on the casual remark that had just been made.

'A chance to show off my abilities in front of an assistant who admires me...'

A peculiar part of his heart felt agitated. Anyone might feel this way, but he hadn't expected Kishiar to say such a thing. He was equally surprised by the considerably harsher than usual response to the impudent request, something he hadn't anticipated.

To be able to see the genuine emotions of a man, who was normally difficult to comprehend, felt strangely new.

His serious mood due to letters from the Tain Ducal House and Ejain had significantly improved. Feeling lighter, Yuder waited for Kishiar's conversation to subside before asking a question.

"So, Commander, do you intend to accept all the requests written in these letters?"

"I'll have to talk to both, but probably so."

Kishiar answered without hesitation.

"I've felt the need to send the Cavalry and tidy up the western border even without collaborating with the Tain Duchy. It'd be better if we could discreetly deal with Second Prince Nelarn along the way."

"..."

It was perfect. Just the answer Yuder had imagined.

If Kishiar hadn't been so worried about the monsters appearing in the western territories, his hesitation about how to persuade him would have seemed foolish.

"Are you worried about facing a terrifying monster?"

"Why would I be?"

Yuder glanced down at his gloved hand and smiled coldly.

"...I'm looking forward to it immensely."

Two men stood in front of the Regien Tower, faces deeply hidden under pilgrim hats, wearing the clothes of priests who serve the sun god. Several knights solemnly stood their ground in front of the tower, protected by magic to imprison nobles with exceptional abilities.

"Good day. I am here to see Mr. Bertrail..."

As one of the priests approached the knights and began to speak, all eyes turned toward them.

"Are you the priests who have come to offer the final prayers?"

"Yes."

"Show me proof that you have come from the temple."

At the knight's words, the shorter priest hastily took out a holy symbol and a scripture from his bag. His hands trembled slightly, but the knight didn't notice. With a solemn face, he merely nodded and gestured toward the interior.

"Please enter."

The tower gate opened. The two priests followed the knight's guidance, climbing the stairs to the topmost floor of the tower. The taller priest followed the knight well, but the shorter one's pace slowed considerably after climbing a few floors.

"My apologies. May I carry my company?"

"Ah... Please do."

The knight thought the taller of the priests had a surprisingly vigorous strength for a cleric. Only after they had walked to the point of exhaustion did they finally reach a door. It took seven turns of the magical key to unlock the rusted locks and push the door open.

Although the room was as worn as any typical noble's quarters, it was filled with the stench of death. The ragged breath of a man, teetering on the brink of death, echoed from the bed placed beside the window. The priests approached the bedside and looked down at the man lying there.

The only prisoner trapped in this place, Bertrail Shand Apeto, lay there with his eyes half-open, his body emaciated and shriveled to the point that his former appearance was barely recognizable. His clouded, milk-white eyes flickered restlessly, reaching into the empty air as if possessed by a demon. His lips, nearly devoid of teeth, mumbled something incoherent.

Thinking the priests were stunned into silence, the knight who had led them offered consolation.

"It was said that the poison is the cause of this transformation, not possession by a demon. His mind has merely gone."

"...I see."

The taller of the two priests muttered under his breath.

"If the priests are worried, I'll stay here."

"No, we appreciate your offer, but it is tradition that no one other than family should accompany during the final prayer. If anything happens during the prayer, we will call for you, knight."

"Very well. I'll be outside the door. Call me immediately if you need me."

Well, whether a man about to die would be able to hear the prayer, he can't say for sure. With a glance of disinterest at Bertrail, the knight turned and left.

The priests stood still until they heard the door close. A few moments later, the shorter man removed his pilgrim's hat, revealing his face before letting out a sigh.

Surprisingly, he was a young man from the South, with the distinctive deep red skin of his people.

"...Young Master. Is it really necessary to go this far? This man has already been punished. He'll die soon without us doing anything."

"Hosanna. If you were going to complain, you should have stayed behind."

"But..."

"The true punishment does not end with death, you should know that."

The taller man let out a cold laugh.

"I resolved to kill the culprit with my own hands, but I didn't succeed then. Now it's time to finish what I started. He must not die in peace, listening to prayers, not for the sake of our dying brothers."

"...Still, if those outside discover who we are."

"They didn't even notice you walking with prosthetics thanks to my abilities. Why worry now?"

The eyes of the young man called Hosanna darkened. His gaze turned to the prosthetic leg hidden beneath his priestly robes.

"...I apologize for the inconvenience of carrying me."

The taller man clicked his tongue at the crestfallen Hosanna.

"I'm tired of hearing that. If you can't watch, turn around. It will be over soon."

Leaving Hosanna behind, the taller man approached the front of the bed. He knelt down as if about to pray devoutly and removed his pilgrim's hat.

"Bertrail Shand Apeto. Look at me."

The moment the face, half-covered with a dreadful scar, was revealed, Bertrail's eyes, previously aimlessly fluttering, widened as if torn apart.

"Are you coming to your senses after all this time?"

"Hu, hu, help, you, you're.....!"

"I am the Reaper, here to harvest your life."

"Sa, save... there, no, no one.....!"

"For our brothers, you cannot die peacefully."

With his icy retort, the man extended a hand to grasp Bertrail's face. Despite Bertrail's desperate thrashing and screams, the noises from his throat, now on the cusp of death, were pathetically weak.

"Ahh, no...!"

Moments later, a dim light flowed from the man's hand. A terrible convulsion, its sound unable to manifest, continued. Avoiding the sight, Hosanna, with a voice stricken with fear, cautiously asked.

"...What happens to him now?"

"He will perceive the last few minutes before his death as hundreds of years. And during those hundreds of years, he will burn alone in the fires of hell, screaming in agony as his body is torn apart."

As he said, a few minutes later Bertrail's spasms ceased. As the man removed his hand from the head he was holding, the hair, which had gone stark white within minutes as if aged by hundreds of years, began to fall out onto the sheets. His shriveled face was frozen in a grotesque mask of pain, mouth agape in a terrible expression.

"Is he dead?"

"Yes."

The man stood up from his place, casting a scornful look at Bertrail's corpse as he muttered.

"Even this was too peaceful an end for him."

"..."

"Let's go, Hosanna. We have to finish what the sage asked us to do."

"Just that? What about Gayle and Doyle..."

"Yes. We'll look for those two you're so concerned about."

In the middle of speaking, the man furrowed his brow, turning his head to look out of the heavy window.

"...It seems like someone is coming."

"Eh?"

No sooner had Hosanna questioned, a rough shout accompanied by the sound of horse hooves could be heard from outside. The man, listening to the noise, lifted a corner of his mouth, muttering.

"Seems we found the real priests who were supposed to be here sooner than expected. It won't be easy to leave without a trace. We'll have to escape using your power."

Hosanna's surprised expression quickly froze over.

"Understood. Give me your hand....."

Moments later, the knights who had rushed to the top of the tower unlocked the seven padlocks and kicked the door open to enter.

"Stay still, you charlatans! State your identities now...! Huh?"

"There's no one inside!"

"Magic and magic tools are unusable here, how could they possibly...!"

"Search the area thoroughly!"

As the confused knights scoured the narrow interior of the tower, the corpse on the bed continued to lie coldly like garbage, growing colder still.

Turning

Chapter 216

Light blazed and space tore open in the most tucked-away alley of the Seventh Wall of the Empire's capital. Two men dressed in pilgrim's robes emerged from the opened space, unperturbed by the startled rats scurrying away. They calmly surveyed their surroundings.

"Is this the place we remembered?"

"Yes. Just in case, I set our location here."

"Good. It seems we are close to the meeting place as well. Hosanna, put on your hat and gloves. We're moving immediately."

The man with a horrific burn scar covering half of his face, Nahan, donned a pilgrim's hat, which concealed his features up to his neck. Despite having just committed a murder, his face remained disturbingly serene. He put on long gloves, entirely concealing his skin, and began to walk as if nothing had happened. Beside him, Hosanna, looking a little anxious, followed suit and put on his hat and gloves. He limped slightly as he stuck close behind Nahan.

"Why have the noble priests of light come to such a desolate place...? Would you like to try some medicine that I sell?"

"..."

"Gentlemen, who are you looking for? Shall I help you...?"

As they exited the spiderweb-like alley, their surroundings swarmed with cautious and greedy eyes. Nahan ignored an old man who extended a hand with a sinister smile and passed by, but Hosanna didn't know how to react. He stopped, only to have an old man grab his wrist.

"Don't be a nuisance. Scram."

Nahan, who had returned, spat out a word to the old man who was holding Hosanna. With a scream, as if they had seen a terrifying monster, the menacing glances momentarily vanished.

"Th-thank you, Young Master. Did you use your power?"

"Yes."

"You shouldn't get caught because of me... I'm sorry."

Nahan disregarded Hosanna's apology, pulling him by the arm, and resumed walking. This time, they were able to make it to the main road without any interruptions. Ordinary folks bustling in the market entrance didn't find anything odd about the two priests in pilgrim's attire.

It had been a while since they naturally melted into the crowd and started walking when Nahan finally opened his mouth again.

"Hosanna."

"Yes, Young Master."

"There probably won't be any big problems, but just in case, I'm telling you this beforehand. Once we reach the meeting place, do not open your mouth. If there's an emergency, and I give you a signal, open up the space immediately. Somewhere we can escape to."

"...Understood."

"Don't let your guard down. We're almost there. One of the brothers sent by the sage will be waiting there."

The cruel voice echoed somberly from within the pilgrim's hat. They entered an alley close to the Sixth Wall and arrived in front of an old house located amidst aged, dilapidated inns. As soon as Nahan checked the small plaque attached to the heavily rusted gate, a man emerged from the alley behind them.

"You're late. Do you know how long I've waited?"

"Well, it just happened."

"Nahan, why do you always take the sage's requests so lightly..."

The man who was about to speak further with a frown, let out a sigh and dropped his gaze.

"Just come inside for now. I'm definitely reporting this."

"Do as you wish, brother."

Nahan followed him, his face entirely devoid of fear. When the man knocked on the rusty door, someone peered out from inside after a moment.

"When did the priests arrive? This isn't a temple."

"We heard there was someone here who wished to mend what cannot be mended."

The brash tone of Nahan's words immediately changed the expression in the eyes of the man who emerged from within. He scanned the three of them from top to bottom before sharply opening his mouth.

"State your name."

"Star of Nagran."

"...You've come in strange attire."

Only then did the man snort and step aside.

"Enter. The person you seek has already arrived. But, we must perform a small check to ensure you carry no danger before you proceed, I hope you understand."

Nahan, Hosanna, and another man patiently waited as the host checked their pockets. He found nothing on Nahan but, when he pulled out scriptures and holy symbols from Hosanna's possession, he adopted a visibly shaken expression. He seemed to doubt if they were truly priests.

"Fine. Follow me."

The house inside was very dark and smelled musty. However, following the host up to a room on the second floor revealed an improbably clean space. In front of the curtain that covered half the room, incense had been lit, casting an enchanting fragrance. Through the faint light cast by the incense, Nahan and Hosanna could see the silhouette of someone sitting behind the curtain. Although seated, the robust stature of the middle-aged man was clearly visible.

"Master, the guests have arrived."

"Finally, they are here."

The shadow of the figure behind the curtain moved gently, waving a hand.

"Sit down there."

If there was a typical noble demeanor, full of arrogance and formality, this man embodied it. Even after all three had taken their seats, the man did not speak for quite some time, observing them as if scrutinizing something.

Any ordinary person might have been too intimidated or terrified to speak first, but even after a considerable time had passed, the guests maintained their composure. Finally, the man behind the curtain seemed satisfied and broke the silence.

"Hmm. Indeed, you do not seem ordinary."

"..."

"Thank you for coming. We can skip the boring parts about where I heard about you and why I invited you."

"Yes."

At Nahan's response, the middle-aged man chuckled quietly.

"Even though I am in exile due to unfortunate circumstances, a friend of mine, who used to be an Apeto's collaborator, highly praised your abilities. Frankly, when I first heard about it, I doubted how a man could cure a disease of the mind. But seeing you today, oddly enough, I am convinced."

"..."

"I will get to the point. Can you show me once again the miracle you showed him?"

A miracle. It was a heavy word. After a brief silence, Nahan nodded.

"Certainly, it's possible. Given a few conditions are met."

"Conditions. You mean seeing the face and making direct eye contact?"

"Yes."

"So, it means that it's possible right now if you just see the face?"

"That's right."

"More bold and succinct than I thought."

After making that evaluation, the middle-aged noble tapped the end of the cane he was holding. After a moment, he seemed to have made a decision and gestured to the attendant standing in the corner of the room.

"Good. The curtain may now be drawn back."

"Yes, Master."

The guide respectfully approached and pulled back the curtain. The man hidden inside finally revealed himself, grinning haughtily at Nahan and Hosanna.

"Do you know who I am?"

"We do not."

"Aren't you curious?"

"We understand it's not our place to be curious about your identity."

"Indeed. Clever. Now, let's see your faces."

Hosanna hesitated for a moment. But after seeing the subtle gesture from Nahan, indicating that it was safe, he removed his pilgrim's hat.

"..."

Unlike the other, more ordinarily looking person, Nahan and Hosanna were distinctively noticeable, yet the noble man showed little reaction upon seeing their faces. This was due to Nahan's ability, which he had employed the moment they entered, enabling him to control the small space and distort what was seen.

"Very well. I'll give you one chance. I've been plagued by a horrendous migraine for a long time. If you can cure it, consider it a small test passed, and I'll open the way for an introduction to the person who truly needs you. But if you can't...you may not leave here in one piece today."

It was a threat, not a test. But Nahan didn't flinch; instead, he gave a chilling, sly smile. He stood up and walked closer to the curtain. The middle-aged man leaning on his extravagant, jewel-encrusted cane watched him.

"Judging from those rings on your fingers, I can guess how much you've suffered."

The noble wore several rings, each with a large gemstone, designed to press against his temples for relief.

"You recognized them."

"Could you now look into my eyes, please?"

"Like this..."

The moment their gazes met, the haughty expression on the noble's face slackened in surprise.

"..."

"Hey. You're not intending to trick our master, are you?"

The guide, worried that Nahan might be up to something, drew his sword from its sheath. However, as his gaze briefly met Nahan's, his face, too, went blank in astonishment. An eerie illusion started to disrupt their sight and hearing. The sword clattered to the ground, but no one responded to the sound.

"Idiots."

Nahan murmured towards them, opening his mouth with an expression like he was looking at insects.

"You all can't even resist making eye contact, and yet you keep doing repulsive things."

"Nahan, we can't kill them. The sage said..."

"I'm not going to kill them, so be quiet, will you? You're distracting me."

At Nahan's response, his comrade scowled. Hosanna looked at them anxiously, but Nahan didn't care and put his hand on the noble man's head. Then, the man, as if he'd seen a delightful fantasy, broke into a wide grin and chuckled while rubbing his hand.

"Hehe, Duke Diarca... Yes, this is the method that Durmand found for His Highness the Duke. Now that the Crown Prince is better, he no longer has to worry or lose sleep anymore. Those poor souls, stars, or whatever they were, have been taken care of, so there's no issue with what comes next. Please remember my loyalty even after His Highness the Crown Prince ascends to the throne. That would be enough for me..."

When Nahan withdrew his hand, the noble man's face returned to its blank state. Nahan looked down at his face, lost in thought for a moment before turning his head. Both Hosanna and his comrade couldn't hide their surprise at hearing the names of such significant figures.

"Diarca and the Crown Prince, huh? Did the Sage know about this?"

Turning

Chapter 217

"Diarca, and the Crown Prince. Did the sage know about this?"

"No. He didn't. If the Durmand that I know of is the same Baron Durmand, he's a powerful noble from the Diarca Duchy. Had I known, would I have risked coming here in madness?"

Their colleague spoke so, but Nahan did not nod. He only stared quietly at the man's face. A cold sweat began to bead on the man's forehead under Nahan's gaze, as if trying to pierce his thoughts.

"Nahan. You're not planning to use your power on me, are you? Isn't the reason they contacted us after stepping on our tails because you used tricks to infiltrate Apeto? The sage really..."

"Hey, brother. Have I ever done you harm?"

A cold smile spread across Nahan's scarred face.

"Doubts like that aren't good. In many ways."

"I, I didn't mean..."

"Anyway, that's that."

Nahan quickly changed his expression and turned sharply.

"It is true that I borrowed the power of the sage to infiltrate Apeto and put a line on the sidelines. I came here to repay and clean up, but I never thought that such a big man would be caught... What should we do?"

His gray eyes scanned over Baron Durmand and his subordinate coldly.

"It's certain that this guy needed power to cure mental illness. After verifying that the power is real, he probably planned to introduce it to the Crown Prince, achieve his goal, and then deal with the aftermath."

"Deal with...?"

The colleague's face turned white once again.

"Nahan, can't you erase their memories with your power?"

"My power is to manipulate illusions, not memories. It's much easier to drive them mad by showing continuous illusions. Or we could just kill them now, while they're defenseless."

At Nahan's cold response, the man bit his lip.

"We can't do that. Killing a high-ranking noble for such a reason is far too dangerous. Instead... let's pretend to cure his migraine and then run away. I will explain it to the sage."

"If they believe we cured them, won't they keep looking for us? Didn't you complain about how hard it was to evade the Peletta Knights? You want to add the Diarca to that?"

"That's true, but we need to let the sage know so that he can come up with a plan. And in the first place, all of that is because of you...!"

"Shh. If you raise your voice, they might wake from the illusion."

The man, who had started to raise his voice, was taken aback by Nahan's words and shut his mouth. He looked anxiously at Baron Durmand, who was lost in the illusion. Thankfully, the Baron was still swaying in a daze, regardless of the loud conversation.

The man sighed softly and spoke in a hushed voice.

"Anyway, the reason our situation is becoming increasingly dangerous is because of you. If it weren't for you, Gayle and Doyle would still be with us, and the Peletta Knights wouldn't be so relentless."

"Gayle and Doyle. The sage didn't look for them either."

"Have you forgotten who Peletta Duke is? How do we find them when they're caught by the Cavalry that's much stronger than us? I don't think they're alive. They're probably already..."

The colleague gritted his teeth and turned away.

"So please, stop taking risks and just heed the sage's advice for once! Who do you think pulled you out of that deathly swamp?"

The moment his words ended, an icy chill seemed to plunge the atmosphere to sub-zero.

The man stifled the laugh he had barely managed to muster and stiffened at the sight of Nahan, his face expressionless. He raised his hands in immediate apology.

"... I apologize. I know you dislike hearing about it, but I spoke without thinking in my anxiety."

"It was Hosanna and the sage himself who saved me. Neither you nor your brothers have a place to debate that."

Nahan responded with an unnervingly calm voice.

"And has the sage ever objected to my saving the brothers?"

"...He hasn't, but still..."

Before the man could add anything to his muttered words, as if helpless, Nahan, his lips slightly curved up, cut him off.

"Both you and I owe our lives to someone else's rescue. Don't you think it's too cowardly to refuse to save other brothers in danger just because you don't want to disturb the peace you've regained? That would be an unfair thing to say to Gayle and Doyle, who chose to risk their lives and came to help me, knowing the danger."

For a moment, Hosanna, standing behind him, clenched his fists with a gloomy expression. Nahan knew that he felt guilty for roping Gayle and Doyle into their troubles, but he said nothing and pretended not to know, simply staring at his comrade.

"..."

In the end, the man closed his mouth, his face a mix of anger and complexity. Nahan turned back with a peaceful expression and opened his mouth leisurely, gazing at the two men lost in fantasy.

"In any case, I will follow your advice this time not to kill people indiscriminately. But before that... We should ask what problem the Crown Prince has that made him look for us."

"Why are you doing that again? I've told you not to do anything unnecessary...!"

"Be quiet. Even the sage needs to know the reasons."

Ignoring his comrade coolly, Nahan moved forward, and as he waved his hand lightly once more, Baron Durmand seemed to suddenly notice something and looked around. The man, still staggering with a cloudy gaze, opened his mouth as if bewitched.

"When did I get here... Hmm? Oh, sorry. You're asking if the Crown Prince is okay? Stop it."

The nobleman sitting in his place moved his hand as if smoking and sighed.

"Everything has been chaotic since that damned assassination attempt. Despite the scars on his face healing completely, he constantly sees red scars and has smashed every mirror. Just like those Apeto bastards. If he had stayed a little longer, he would have had enough time to reflect and bow down to Duke Diarca. Who knew it would turn out like this."

Hearing the words, Nahan's eyes narrowed. His comrade was instinctively terrified at the thought of having heard the deepest secret of the imperial family.

"He must rise again. He must. How did we put him in that place? It's unthinkable that he would fall here..."

The man finished speaking and stared blankly into space, his eyes lost in thought once again.

"...The Crown Prince's insanity, indeed."

Nahan absentmindedly stroked his chin as he murmured,

"That's just about when they would contact the likes of us."

"Na-Nahan, you don't mean to tell me you're actually interested in that story? I thought you said you would rather die than deal with nobility."

When his comrade exclaimed in shock, Nahan shrugged as though he was stating the obvious.

"Of course, I hate it. No interest whatsoever. What these swinish characters do or don't do is of no concern to me. If I can help it, I'd prefer to avoid them for life."

At Nahan's retort, his comrade frowned and shook his head.

"Then we should hurry and pretend to treat them before escaping. The moment they realize we've heard this story, we're as good as dead!"

"Understood, so try to keep your composure, brother. I'll end the illusion soon."

After a while, Nahan showed a few more illusions to the nobleman and his subordinate before flicking his finger. They were left believing that they had merely had a dream.

"From now on, you will not feel any migraines. Once a few days pass and you begin to believe, contact us at the same place."

"Is that true?"

The nobleman, skeptical but hopeful, touched his face and smiled.

"Good. I'll let you leave unharmed for today. Begone."

As an arrogant noble, he believed that sparing their lives was a generous enough favor. Having received their dismissal, the three of them swiftly retreated and left the premises. Only once they had moved a considerable distance from the house did Hosanna, sweat glistening on his forehead, dare to speak.

"...What if the illusion doesn't work? You said it might not work on those with strong mental fortitude."

"For me, that doesn't matter, but those kinds of characters have such weak mental power that they fell into my illusions without me exerting any effort. Don't worry, Hosanna, there won't be a problem."

Nahan replied nonchalantly. Their colleague listening nearby interjected with a skeptical face.

"Is there anyone who could escape your ability?"

"Of course, there is."

"Have you seen them?"

"Yes. Several times."

At Nahan's reply, his colleague blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected that response.

"Oh... I see. Whoever they are, I hope they come to our Star of Nagran. If they are that mentally strong, even the sage would be pleased."

"He said he didn't want to."

"Pardon?"

Nahan didn't give any further explanation. His colleague, assuming he had heard wrong, quickly forgot about the matter. His mind filled with thoughts of reporting to the sage, he bid farewell to Nahan and Hosanna with a heavy heart and disappeared in another direction.

Nahan watched in silence as he departed, then turned to Hosanna and asked,

"Hosanna, what do you think the sage would think about that story?"

"Pardon?"

"It's the Crown Prince."

"Well... I don't know."

Hosanna glanced around and shook his head with a bewildered expression.

"He's a good person... He wouldn't put us in danger twice. I think..."

"A good person."

Nahan's lips closed tightly.

"Yes, let's hope so."

"Why? Are you worried?"

"No. Never mind. Also, it seems that the swinish character we just met doesn't trust us and has sent someone to tail us. We should teleport directly across the market from the next alley."

Hosanna was startled and widened his eyes, but he didn't turn to look behind. He nodded and shifted his stride with feigned nonchalance.

A moment later, a flash of light streaked from beyond the alley. By the time the henchman of Baron Durmand, who had been tailing them, sluggishly pursued, there was no one left in the alley.

"Yuder."

At Ever's voice, Yuder turned his head and squinted at the rising dawn sun.

"Yes?"

"Do you really think we might be dispatched to the West?"

"Didn't you hear from the Commander? I thought he mentioned it to the Deputy Commanders."

"We only got a brief message, so it doesn't feel real."

Ever, who had frowned as if to say, 'isn't it obvious?' quickly broke into a smile.

Turning

Chapter 218

"But I thought you, Yuder, being able to meet him directly, might have heard something more detailed."

Yuder scanned the surroundings. The training ground was nearly deserted, the dawn training period nearing its end.

It had been about three days since Kishiar had announced his plan to deploy the Cavalry to accomplish two tasks at once. The cycle was not yet finished, but he tried his best to keep up with work, using letters and other means.

There was not much issue since only three Deputy Commanders and Yuder, who often interacted with the Commander, were involved in the tasks. However, Yuder wondered how the other Deputy Commanders perceived the permission he had obtained to freely enter the Commander's office under the pretext of sorting letters.

Neither Ever, Steiber, nor Kanna would ostracize or dislike Yuder merely because he received special treatment from Kishiar, but one could never be sure. Yuder answered as cautiously as possible.

"There wasn't much difference for me either. The Commander was often away."

It wasn't a lie. Even though Kishiar had allowed Yuder to stay in the Commander's office as long as he wanted, he had only shown his face once in three days. And even then, he had appeared with a weary face, received the letter, and entered the room again with a regretful smile.

"I see... He still seems quite busy."

"But he has already decided on the matter of the Western mission, so I think he will provide more details soon."

Kishiar's image faded from his mind at Ever's worried words. Fearing that she might worry excessively, Yuder steered the conversation in a different direction.

"But, Ever. Are you not worried about having to fight monsters if we go West?"

"Hm. Have you forgotten why I first awakened, Yuder?"

Ever grinned and clenched and unclenched her fist in a playful gesture. Power flowed like a ripple over the special glove designed to reveal the fingers, disappearing quickly.

"I slew dozens of monsters that were ravaging our village right after I awakened. I'm not scared of that at all. What worries me more are leading the Shin Division and members who won't listen."

"Are you sure, considering that the monsters that will appear there might be entirely different from the ones we have observed and learned about so far?"

"Absolutely. I'm stronger than I was then, and now I have comrades I can rely on. Are you worried, Yuder?"

He had tried not to create reasons for worry and was confident about the results. But listening to Ever's confident smile and direct question, he felt strangely unsettled.

The members had learned the names, appearances, and weaknesses of monsters that frequently appeared across the continent, preparing for the mission that they would eventually undertake. As this information was the accumulation of people's long-term efforts, it was highly accurate. If one memorized that, they would be confident in defeating any monster.

But Yuder had realized that this information was useless in practice when he was first dispatched to suppress the monsters in the West in his previous life. The monsters recorded were only a part. Most of them had not been recorded properly because most of the witnesses had died, or there were several times more monsters that were entirely new.

He had meticulously planned to avoid experiencing such a situation again, and countless rehearsals took place within his head, but it was an immutable law that he could never guarantee a 100% certainty. Even with his exceptional abilities and plans, it was impossible for him alone to control everything.

Yuder condensed all these thoughts into a simple response.

"Expectation and worry are separate matters."

"I suppose so."

Ever, who gently nodded in agreement, cracked a small smile.

"Still, I somehow feel this mission will turn out well too. It has always been the case so far, hasn't it? We were really worried during the Harvest Festival, but it worked out well, and the trial of the Apeto family also ended satisfactorily. Plus..."

Looking at her enumerating on her fingers, a faint smile crossed his face. As she rattled off her words, it somehow felt as if she was summarizing and praising all the issues he had resolved since his return.

'Yes, just like she said, everything has been going smoothly so far.'

"...So, it will be alright. Ah, did I just talk like Kanna just now?"

Looking somewhat sheepish, Ever admitted that she may have picked up the carefree personality of the girl she spent most of her time with lately. In response, Yuder shook his head.

"Thanks to you, I feel a bit more relaxed now. Thank you."

"I'm glad to hear that. I used to be a worrywart too, but my perspective changed quite a bit after watching the trials of the Apeto family, so I try not to be like that."

"What changed your perspective at that time?"

It seemed she hadn't taken on any special duties related to the trials beyond escorting the witnesses. Intrigued by what might have occurred, Yuder asked, to which she responded that nothing in particular happened.

"Just from standing behind the Commander and watching the trials alongside those who came forward to testify, I had a realization."

"What was it?"

"Even the nobles that I used to fear turned out to be nothing special in the court."

Ever revealed a playful grin.

"They looked pathetic trying to reduce their mistakes, and their stubbornness or crying to avoid punishment didn't seem noble at all. It was also funny to see those who tried to intimidate the witnesses run away without a word at the display of my power."

"..."

"Do you remember? When all of us from the Cavalry gathered to drink, we had a conversation like this. Yuder, you said that I could become someone who steps forward and speaks up for the weak, regardless of the circumstances around us."

At first, he wondered when he had said such a thing, but soon enough, the memories came flooding back.

'Was it around the time when I first met Kiolle Diarca in the training field and knocked him down?'

At the training field of the Imperial Knights, the trainees who were merely commoners and had just joined the Cavalry couldn't say anything when the members of the Imperial Knights, who were against the use of the training field, behaved rudely. Ever regretted not being able to step forward at the time, but Yuder, who came from the future, told her there was no need for that. In a few years, they would become so powerful that they wouldn't even notice something like the Imperial Knights. All they lacked was the realization and experience of their own strength.

"...Yes, I remember."

"At that time, I doubted if it was possible, but while helping those who came for the trial, I realized that I had truly become someone who could do that. Can you believe it?"

Ever described it as a novel and wonderful feeling.

"So now, I'm not afraid of anything anymore. I realized that having faith in the future and confidence in myself can be this much fun. And all of that faith came from the Commander, you, Yuder, and our fellow Cavalry members."

"Hmm. I..."

"You're trying to say you didn't really do anything there, right?"

When he started to mumble uncomfortably due to the praise at the end of her nice speech, Ever interrupted him.

"Don't say that. You, Yuder, have done enough to earn such praise. Even now, you're helping me by observing my abilities more meticulously than I am. How could I not be grateful?"

"...That's just what I did while training together."

"Everyone is very jealous of me. You know, some people were really upset because they thought I alone had the opportunity to train one-on-one with you, right?"

Yuder nodded awkwardly. At this, Ever burst out laughing and patted him on the shoulder.

"Even the Commander added in a letter to me that he was jealous of the great opportunity I had gotten. Can you believe it?"

"...The Commander said that?"

Did the Commander insert such a thing in between the letters to the Deputy Commanders, even though he couldn't go out because of his duties? When Yuder swept down her face with a feeling of bewilderment about five times greater than before, Ever's laughter grew louder.

It felt very strange. The past and the present tangled in his mind, then unraveled and disappeared into a blank slate. Unable to figure out what to say in response, Yuder remained silent until the fully risen sun in the sky above caught his eye.

"Ah, it's time for breakfast now. Let's go inside."

Yuder, following the footsteps of Ever who brushed off her seat and stood up, turned his gaze slightly. He thought of someone who might be behind the curtains drawn so as not to see inside, on the top floor of the sparkling Cavalry building in the light.

Suddenly, he felt an illusion as if the heat rising from the inside of his chest spread to the end of his lips.

"The Duke of Peletta sent a reply saying he wouldn't help us?"

An astounded voice echoed within the beautiful reception room of the Tain Duchy's main residence. The Duke of Tain, who stylishly trimmed his beard, rarely fiddled with it carelessly, but at this moment he couldn't hide his rage and unwittingly roughened his chin.

"What the hell does this mean? Did his liver swell because he won a trial against Apeto once?"

"Exactly, he has no intention of collaborating with the Tain Duchy, but he does agree that the situation with the monsters appearing in the west doesn't look ordinary, so he said he would dispatch the Cavalry separately."

"So, he's saying the same thing, isn't he, Theo?"

The sharp gaze of Duke Tain turned toward Theorado, the Commander of the Imperial Knights, who was sitting in front of him. Commander Theorado also happened to be the Duke's cousin.

"He's saying he won't cooperate with us but he'll deal with the monsters in the west on his own? What kind of nonsense is that? If the people sent by Duke Peletta roam and wreak havoc in our territory, we won't be able to say a word."

"In that case, couldn't you send the knights and mercenaries as you initially planned and draw a line to prevent any approach?"

"The timing is the problem."

Duke Tain mumbled as he rubbed his forehead.

"I've recently sent a large number of goods through a newly developed sea trade route. In order to protect that, I've already dispatched all those who can be mobilized. Who would've known that right after that, such a large amount of monsters would appear?"

Duke Tain, sighing, turned his head and looked at Commander Theorado.

"Theo, can you lend me just a few of the Imperial Knights?"

"That would be difficult."

"We could use the pretext of training to send them over there."

"Don't you know? A few months ago, we sent a few knights, including Kiolle Diarca, to the East for training for the same reason. After an accident occurred there, the oversight has become strict."

"Damn that Diarca. Worthless as always."

Turning

Chapter 219

"Damn that Diarca. Worthless as always."

Duke Tain spat out a curse, breaking his gaze in another direction and resting a hand on his forehead.

"All that drivel about making use of Duke Peletta to sort out the Western territories. Was this a ploy to watch me flounder? Quite possible, knowing that sly fox."

"..."

Commander Theorado responded by merely nodding slightly instead of replying. His disinterest in the Duke's grumbling was palpable.

"Theo, do you think this is only my problem? What exactly were you doing while I was gallivanting in the South for months over investment matters? You should've informed me sooner about the situation in the capital... No, forget it."

The Duke started to say something to his cousin, but abruptly shut his mouth, not wanting to stoke his rage further. He couldn't forget the fact that he wouldn't have contacted Theorado if not for this incident. Their notorious indifference towards others, combined with an obsessive digging into their interests, was as good as a birthmark ingrained in their blood.

The only difference was that for Theorado it was the sword, and for the Duke, it was speculative investment.

'I bet he's going to argue that he's done his part just by forwarding a letter to Duke Peletta on my behalf.'

A sigh slipped out involuntarily, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He hadn't expected Duke Peletta, of all people, residing like a parasite within the Imperial Knights' territory, to refuse the request of the Imperial Knight Commander. Including Theorado's seeming indifference, it was utterly despicable and infuriating.

Duke Tain rubbed his chin nervously, muttering under his breath.

"Theo, is there any way you could use your power to get the Cavalry and Duke Peletta to leave the Imperial Knights' territory?"

"The Imperial Knights' territory isn't my personal property. It belongs to His Majesty the Emperor. It's impossible with my authority as the Imperial Knight Commander."

"What about if you went personally to ask?"

At the Duke's words, Commander Theorado frowned.

"Do I really need to go that far? Can't you just slightly compromise the pace of the investment hub development beyond the border?"

"Compromise? You make it sound so easy!"

"Even if I went now, it's unlikely that I would be able to meet Duke Peletta."

"What? Why's that? Does he consider us, the Tain, lesser than Apeto? Even if it's the Emperor's will?"

Duke Tain glared furiously. After a moment of silence, Commander Theorado spoke softly.

"He hasn't left the grounds since his visit to the Imperial Mage's office. It's not certain, but it seems he may not be well."

"Not well?"

Duke Tain echoed before rubbing his chin as though something came to mind.

"Ah. You're referring to that thing that half of the Dukes experience. So, it persists even after awakening?"

"I'm not sure about that."

"Typical. The idea that someone on the brink of death would suddenly recover just because they obtained some kind of power, like the Awakener, is preposterous. Those fools of Apeto are indeed idiots. To leap into an investment that won't profit them just based on that. If I were the Duke of Apeto, I would never approve such foolish requests for support."

"So, it is only natural that Duke Apeto is in the state he is now," concluded Duke Tain after pouring out his blunt words, his mood noticeably improved. Suddenly, as if a delightful thought had crossed his mind, he smiled.

"Hmm, Theo."

"Yes?"

"If Duke Peletta's condition is really as bad as they say, he wouldn't personally appear for the monster subjugation mission. He would probably send his underlings, wouldn't he?"

"That seems likely."

"Then, it seems you must send another letter to Duke Peletta."

A cold smile passed over Duke Tain's face.

"Write that we regret his refusal but understand it, and as the situation has become urgent, he should send his men to the West as soon as possible."

"Will that be sufficient?"

"Yes. And as the ruler of the family responsible for the West, I must also notify and prepare my territory there."

'I will make you pay for daring to ignore me.' Duke Tain, swallowing the words unspoken, twisted his lips in a sly smile.

Recently, responses to the replies that Kishiar had sent to Theo, the Commander of the Imperial Knights, and Prince Ejain of Nelarn had arrived.

Yuder quickly opened the two letters and skimmed their contents.

'Tain has written that although they regret our refusal to cooperate, they urge us to go West as soon as possible. Prince Ejain wrote that the situation is urgent and he will set off ahead of us. He suggests we meet near the Great Sarain Forest...'

Great Sarain Forest. Yuder murmured the name, slightly furrowing his brow.

'So they intend to go through there.'

The Great Sarain Forest was a massive woodland that could envelop the entire Western border of the empire. It spanned the borders of no less than four nations, including the Orr Empire. With the forest's tangled vegetation growing back faster than it could be cleared and its perilously rough terrain, anyone lost would meet their end. This was why handling the monsters in the West was more difficult than in other regions.

Also, the fastest route to Nelarn, Prince Ejain's homeland, had to pass through that forest.

'It must be an incredibly urgent situation.'

He neatly folded the two letters and looked over at the Commander's seat. It was empty again today.

Was it an illusion that Kishiar's condition didn't seem to be improving at all? He was fine the rare times they had spoken, but since then, he had returned to this state.

Was it that hard to exert one's natural strength?

Yuder sighed and shifted his gaze toward the corridor. Working alone without Nathan made the fact that Kishiar was there feel oddly like a fantasy. The only sound filling the quiet space was the crackling of the magic stone stove.

Suddenly, he got up and, with the letters in hand, headed towards the inner part of the corridor. The tiles were laid in a way that it was hard to silence one's footsteps, in anticipation of intruders. But to someone who had lived in this space for nearly ten years, it was not a difficult obstacle.

Finally, after slowly making his way between the slight gaps in the tiles, he stood before the Commander's bedroom. A large door stood in the way of his entry.

'...This is too impulsive and rash.'

A cold voice echoed in his mind.

'Why are you here?'

Indeed. He himself couldn't entirely understand why he had acted on such an impulse.

Kishiar understood why he was locked alone within, fending off others. He wasn't resting; he was battling the vast energy within him. If he deemed himself unable to meet others, that judgment must have been correct.

Even though he knew...

"..."

The hand he'd raised as if to knock stopped at the door. For a brief moment, Yuder was torn between a peculiar urge to knock on the door in front of him and his rational mind. Yet, that moment was shattered by the sound of knocking coming from not too far away.

Yuder glanced at the closed door briefly before turning his body. Unlike when he arrived, his movement to leave was incredibly swift.

Heading back toward the office where there was a magic stone stove, another soft knocking sound was heard as he approached the door.

"Who is it?"

"Ah, Yuder. So you are there. It's me, Kanna. I've been looking for you and they told me you'd be in the Commander's office at this time."

A familiar voice sounded from outside the door. Before he opened the door, Yuder adjusted his uniform robe with a tug. Suddenly, a peculiar mark was revealed by the reflection of the light streaming in through the window above the dark blue double doors.

Five indents, as if something blunt had been pressed hard into them. It was clear that they were artificially created, and peculiarly, they were a bit higher than his eye level. The moment his gaze was stolen by those indents, Yuder suddenly realized what they were.

'...Fingers?'

The day he couldn't open this door, Kishiar had braced his hand around there. Even if it were a wooden door, there would have been dozens of protections applied to it, making it harder than steel. Yet, he couldn't believe how easily it was dented.

"Yuder?"

"Ah. Sorry. I was tidying up a bit. I'll come out now."

Yuder opened the door and stepped outside. Kanna, who had been about to say something with an apologetic expression, suddenly cocked her head.

"Did the Commander happen to be out today? If so, I could directly speak and pass on the message to the Commander here..."

"...No. He's not here. Just tell me."

Fortunately, Kanna didn't ask any further and opened her mouth as she moved her steps down the stairs first.

"I'm sorry for bothering you when you're busy. It's about Gayle and Doyle."

"What happened to them?"

He thought that perhaps they had caused some accident being allowed to freely wander within the Cavalry, but Kanna started a completely different story.

"Gayle and Doyle originally lived in the West and drifted into Star of Nagran, so we thought that one of their bases should be there, and we've been trying to read the information. While they were helping with the dishes today, I used my abilities a bit and it seems that I've read the correct locations, maybe because their guard was down."

"Where are they?"

"One is deep within the Great Sarain Forest, another near the Southern Desert, and the last base is... If I read it correctly, it seems to be near the mountain where the Red Stone was."

"The Rik Mountain range?"

"Mm-hmm."

Kanna, who had just nodded, soon wore a serious expression.

"Could the assassins who attacked the Commander at that time have been from there? And we're supposed to head to the West soon. We might encounter them again. That thought worries me."

'Indeed.'

It didn't seem likely that a guy like Nahan who forced strange beliefs and called all Awakeners his siblings would be involved in such actions. But, if their speculation about the division within the group called Star of Nagran was correct, it was a possibility.

'If we exclude the fact that those who could access the top-secret information related to the retrieval of the Red Stone were extremely limited within the Empire...'

Moreover, if it was the Great Sarain Forest in the West, it was indeed the destination they were about to head to soon. Several thoughts crossed his mind in an instant.

"Thanks for letting me know. I will report to Commander and Zuckerman."

After replying, Yuder added a remark after a moment of silence.

"There's no need to worry."

"Mm."

Only then did Kanna turn around with a much brighter face. Yuder added another variable, the 'Star of Nagran,' to the plan for the Western monster extermination mission he held within him.

Turning

Chapter 220

"Sir Aile. Why are you standing here?"

After Kanna had disappeared at a brisk pace, saying that she would go down first for training, it wasn't long before Nathan Zuckerman emerged from the opposite side. He was holding a familiar box in his hand.

"I thought it was about time for you to finish your work... Is there a problem?"

He seemed curious, as the location where Aile had been standing was midway down the stairs leading from the Commander's office.

"No, I was just about to leave. I had some discussions with Kanna who had just arrived to report something..."

"But isn't that a letter for the Commander in your hand?"

Only then did Yuder realize that he was still holding the letters that were supposed to be left on Kishiar's desk. He was considerably flustered.

"Ah, yes. I just need to return this and then I can go."

"Then give it to me. I was about to go in anyway."

"Yes, but there is one more thing I need to tell you before that."

While handing the letter to Nathan, Yuder relayed the story that Kanna had shared. He responded that he would report it directly to Kishiar after listening to the story with a serious expression.

"It's rather startling, the power of an Awakener is truly amazing. We, the Peletta Knights, couldn't have discovered this information no matter how hard we tried. Thank you."

"It was Kanna who did this, so you should thank her."

After making sure that the gratitude which should have been directed towards Kanna didn't veer off course, Yuder cautiously asked Nathan another question.

"If the Peletta Knights have been pursuing them as well, have you had any other gains?"

"We are still in the process of tracking... But as of now, there is nothing definitive I can tell you."

He wished he could know more about the situation, even if it wasn't certain yet. However, that cautious knight was not likely to reveal any more to Yuder.

'It's unfortunate. Unless something is confirmed, Kishiar won't speak up. I guess I have no choice but to find out on my own.'

Until now, Kishiar had assigned all tracking-related tasks to the Peletta Knights, not the Cavalry. It was a natural choice, as the Cavalry were less experienced, but it was a bit disappointing that they lacked information.

'I should consider assigning some of my five nominating rights to them. Eventually, I will have to select some people within the Cavalry to handle such tasks exclusively...'

Yuder recalled the nominating rights he had never used so far, and remembered that he had not yet asked Kishiar if he could include Enon in it.

'I should ask him once the cycle has passed.'

Thinking of Kishiar, he naturally remembered the five fingerprints left on the door.

Were they really his fingerprints left that day? A strange mixture of emotions, both wanting to go up and check again for sure and not wanting to, came to him. Unconsciously, he glanced up at the Commander's office door, and perhaps Nathan Zuckerman noticed something odd because he paused and opened his mouth.

"Sir Aile. Is there anything else you need to do up there?"

"No, there isn't. It's just that..."

After hastily denying it, Yuder suddenly noticed the box held by Nathan Zuckerman again. Yuder quickly changed the subject.

"...That box, as big as a knuckle, seemed familiar," he said.

"Ah, yes. It's the same as what I had brought from the Imperial Mage's Office before."

Nathan looked down at the box as he replied. It seemed his hunch had been correct.

'He brought the same potion as last time? Why?'

"Wasn't it something that one only needed to consume once?"

"Usually, yes..."

Nathan trailed off, furrowing his brows. He glanced around as if inspecting his surroundings, caught his breath, and then spoke in a lower voice.

"There was a warning that his heat period might coincide with the end of the cycle. So, just in case, I requested and brought an additional dosage."

'Heat?'

The unexpected term made his heart jump momentarily. He thought he had heard wrong, but that wasn't the case. Only after seeing Nathan's face, which looked more serious than worried, did his startled mind begin to function properly again.

'Right. It makes sense. I should have entered my second gender manifestation around this time, and since Kishiar's heat coincided with this cycle before... It isn't strange that it's happening now.'

Some things had changed significantly in this life compared to the previous one, and some events were progressing faster, but the overall pattern hadn't altered. Kishiar's heat period was one of the forthcoming events.

However, the timing was inconvenient. This heat period was unexpectedly occurring during a time when Kishiar was naturally exerting his power, and the cycle time was extending. Nathan's worry about what could happen if the two periods overlapped became understandable.

"This hasn't happened before, right?"

"Correct. After His Grace's awakening, there have been only two cycles. This is a first."

"...You must be worried."

"To be honest, yes."

Nathan heaved a small sigh.

"And... has His Grace considered finishing this quickly in his usual way, instead of this... natural method?"

He didn't fully understand the difference between the two methods, but it seemed better to propose a way that wouldn't increase risks. But Nathan could only shake his head bitterly.

"Don't you know His Grace's personality, Sir Aile? He's not one to waver so easily once he makes a decision."

'True enough.'

"His Grace claims there won't be any major issues even if the two periods overlap, but I am not an Awakener, so I can't say for sure. What do you think, Sir Aile? You probably know more about Awakeners' heat period and transformative elements than I do."

Suddenly, the direction of the question pointed towards Yuder. But even Yuder couldn't possibly know the answer.

"I'm not entirely sure either. However, in my case, I was fine even when my second gender manifestation and heat period coincided. So, if His Grace says so, you don't have to worry too much."

After responding, it suddenly occurred to him that as an Omega Awakener, it might not be safe for him to keep working close to Kishiar. He swallowed his hesitation and continued.

"But if the heat period really is approaching, it would be best if I didn't go upstairs for a while. My presence, as an Omega Awakener, might not be beneficial."

"Is that so? His Grace has never mentioned anything of the sort..."

"Haven't you heard about 'scent'?"

"I have heard."

"Then you would understand. It wouldn't be best if I'm too close."

"I remember the Duke never being particularly affected by the scent of other Awakeners... But as you said, Sir Aile, it won't hurt to be careful. Understood. I'll keep that in mind and survey my surroundings a bit more."

'No effect? Hardly likely.'

Yuder recalled the time when Kishiar had kept his distance until the scent from his heat had completely faded. He'd even used magic to deliver items without getting too close.

'It's a sensitive topic, so there's a chance he might not have disclosed it all to Nathan.'

Feeling awkward to discuss such matters, Yuder swiftly changed the subject.

"After delivering Kanna's message, please send any other information for me in a letter, along with the rest of the Deputy Commanders."

"I understand. I heard that Sir Aile is almost done with preparations for your trip to the West, but if you need my assistance, feel free to ask."

As Nathan had suggested, Yuder was overseeing preparations for the Cavalry members heading west according to Kishiar's instructions. Strictly speaking, Kishiar decided on how to divide and mobilize the Cavalry, with Yuder consulting with the Deputy Commanders to implement it. But once they set off, Yuder was likely to be the one in charge.

'Given that Kishiar might not be able to come with us, it'll probably end up that way.'

In his previous life, Kishiar hadn't initially gone to the West. Instead, in his absence, Yuder and the other Deputy Commanders had led the members on the journey.

Then, everyone was apprehensive as if being pulled towards death, but this time it would be different.

"Thank you."

After expressing his gratitude, Yuder turned and descended.

His next agenda was to visit the new laboratory of Thais Yulman and Alik Pelgin, to check the progress of their research.

"Oh, you're here. You're later than usual."

"How are the research plans going?"

"Well, so far it's no different from yesterday."

Thais Yulman chuckled, glancing at the black medium stacked inside the basket. He was currently searching for a way to harness the power of the Red Stone stored in the medium, which was now harmless compared to their previous dangerous influence. He was also investigating the changes that the power caused in the human body.

"Because I'm a mage, it's a bit hard to extract the power inside. But it's a relief that my disciple has awakened. Observations of the changes are going pretty well."

The old mage enthusiastically discussed the notes and logs from his observations, but Yuder couldn't understand half of it due to the complex magic terminology.

"If I could also observe your body... it could speed things up... but that seems like a no-go."

It was obvious who was denying permission. Since Yuder had prevented a power explosion in the basement, the old mage had repeatedly expressed his desire to research him. Yuder was also interested in understanding more about what had happened to him, and was willing to cooperate if possible, but Kishiar had not permitted it, citing unproven safety.

The old mage glanced over Yuder with a covetous look before sighing in disappointment.