

Turning 591

Chapter 591

"To break a mind-shaking power, one needs a mind-shaking chaos," Kishiar said as he exited Hosanna's room, moving forward.

"Judging by the fact he could barely comprehend my question, it seems like it's having some effect, Nathan."

Today's visit to Hosanna by the Gayle and Doyle brothers, who talked about the sage and his associates, and Kishiar's subsequent visit accompanied by Nathan Zuckerman was by no means a coincidence. Multiple stages of groundwork had been laid.

First, Yuder met Gayle and Doyle, subtly leaking information about the sage while requesting help with the second recruitment of Cavalry. The brothers immediately conveyed this information to Hosanna, who felt disquieted upon hearing it. Because he had been exceptionally stable in the recent days, this emotional disturbance had a broader and more intense scope than usual.

To add fuel to the fire, Kishiar appeared with Nathan Zuckerman, who was the object of Hosanna's fear. The change in Hosanna's emotions took a wild turn, more so than ever. Bringing intermittent unrelated topics into their conversation was all part of a scheme to shake Hosanna's mind.

By making him experience emotional extremes, Hosanna finally showed some signs of breaking free from his mental conditioning. Even recognizing a question for the first time was a significant effect.

"I thought it wouldn't help when Baron Aile summoned me, but I'm glad it did," Nathan said.

"Nothing is more terrifying than a surefire belief failing. I hope next time we can have a more meaningful conversation," Kishiar responded as he climbed the stairs. Suddenly, he stopped. Nathan turned his head toward where Kishiar's gaze had landed. A man stood there, as still as a dark shadow.

Standing before them, waiting near the office, Yuder Aile quietly spoke, "Did it go well?"

"Yes, he finally understood the question about the sage's ability. As you suggested, seeing Nathan's face had a good effect."

"I'm glad."

Although his tone could suggest unfortunate news as much as good, Kishiar seemed to take it as the best compliment and smiled warmly.

"Were you worried enough to wait here until I arrived?"

"You never know."

Yuder didn't deny it. Anyone else might have found the answer arrogantly presumptuous, but when he said it, it felt utterly appropriate given his unique aura.

"Was Adjutant Zuckerman also alright?"

"Yes."

"Nathan did nothing, so of course he was fine," Kishiar answered for him, lifting his hand in a slight gesture.

"Shall we go inside to talk now? Nathan, your tasks for today are complete; you can proceed with the next one."

"Yes."

Though Kishiar said 'next task,' his intent to speak privately with Yuder was painfully evident, so Nathan simply nodded, playing ignorant. Ever since Yuder had quickly rejuvenated Kishiar's condition not long ago, Nathan had come to take such matters more lightly.

"Since today's tasks are over and you're going on to the next, are you going to see Gakane now?"

Yuder blinked and asked.

"Yes."

"Understood. I appreciate your assistance."

When Yuder began making plans related to Hosanna, he made a single request to Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman. He asked if Gakane Bolunwald could learn swordsmanship from Nathan.

Kishiar said he would permit it if Nathan was amenable, and after some consideration, Nathan agreed to try it out, albeit for a limited time. Essentially, his agreement was almost akin to repaying a debt he owed to Yuder.

Thus commenced the swordsmanship training, which naturally was a secret that could not be disclosed to anyone. There was scarcely any time to meet, so the lessons had to be squeezed into brief moments of leisure after each of them finished their daily tasks.

Despite receiving only minimal guidance and being burdened with enormous tasks, Gakane managed to fulfill them all. It was proof enough that his request hadn't been made lightly.

It was never too late to learn the art of the sword. With the right aptitude and tenacity, the rest was simply a matter of guidance. Gakane Bolunwald definitely had these qualities.

Underlying it all was a wellspring of pent-up frustration, born from a long-standing yearning. It evoked emotions in Nathan that took him back to his own early days of learning the sword.

So he concluded that if Gakane could last for more than a month, it would be alright to spend a bit more time and teach him properly. Of course, this thought was kept a secret, even from Gakane, Yuder, and Lord Kishiar.

"I haven't been able to properly observe Gakane since I entrusted his training to him. I was wondering how he's progressing. It's good to hear it's going well," Yuder said.

"As far as I can tell, Nathan hasn't complained. I assume the boy has some potential, so there's no need for concern," Kishiar lightly responded as they entered his office.

The appearance of the office they walked into was somewhat different from usual. Papers were piled high, overflowing from the desk to the floor, sofa, and tables.

Both men, aware that these were applications from prospective second-batch members, maintained impassive expressions. Yuder naturally navigated through the papers and asked Kishiar another question.

"Did Hosanna respond to your inquiry?"

"No. But I'm quite certain he's aware; he's just unable to respond," Kishiar said.

"Ah, I see."

Thanks to the efforts of Kanna and Emun in the West, Yuder had gleaned some information about the sage from the Awakeners who had belonged to the Star of Nagran. This allowed him to make certain speculations about the sage's abilities.

First, those from the Star of Nagran invariably saw the sage as a good person, without a hint of malice. This belief was so deeply ingrained that it would not change under any contradictory circumstances.

Second, even though they must have observed and experienced the sage's abilities directly, they appeared unable to recall the specifics. When questioned about it, they conveniently glossed over, as though such matters never existed in their world.

Third, these traits persisted long after their initial meeting with the sage.

From these observations, Yuder speculated that the sage's ability might involve some form of mental manipulation, triggered by a single word or a brief piece of information.

'Perhaps what he implanted in those from the Star of Nagran was a simple notion: that the sage is an entity to be trusted unconditionally,' Yuder thought.

From his experiences in a previous life, he knew that mind-controlling or brainwashing abilities were less effective the more complex the implanted command. Even the smallest deviation in behavior could quickly break the spell.

‘Controlling someone in such detail would require constant attention, and even then it might not be enough. To brainwash a large number of people simultaneously, one could only implant a proposition or two in their minds. Even so, the effect lasting this long is truly remarkable...’

Upon hearing Yuder's speculation, Kishiar offered a new perspective. He suggested that perhaps the duration of the brainwashing effect was continually renewed for those who spent time with the affected individuals.

‘People serving heretics do the same; it's harder to break away from a group when you share the same beliefs.’

It made sense then why the Gayle and Doyle brothers, who were always together, or the many Awakeners in the West, couldn't break away from the Sage despite the passage of time. That's why they had targeted Hosanna as their first objective.

Hosanna was an unusual case; brainwashed by the sage, yet valuing Nahan more than the sage. He occasionally met with Gayle and Doyle, but spent most of his time alone. He was considered the most likely to waver.

And the results obtained today seemed to confirm that assessment.

He was worried that the brothers might not disclose the information properly, so it was worthwhile to secretly leave permission that they could pass it on to Hosanna in advance.

‘Once we add the information about the sage's past that Kanna and Enon will bring, we'll quickly uncover his power and neutralizing methods.’

Such powers were troublesome, as killing the caster didn't necessarily end them. Yuder had learned from past experiences that some people's faith grew stronger if the person they believed in died.

One failure was enough. Even if it was troublesome, the proper course was to methodically find the neutralizing methods, choke their powers, and make them reveal themselves.

"According to Emun's report, a significant number of the Star of Nagran members are interested in the second recruitment of the Cavalry," said Kishiar.

"It seems things are progressing well on that end too."

"True. I was a bit concerned about the Southern merchants who claimed to have made contact with their base in the South, but that's still uncertain. In any case, it's not a significant variable at the moment."

This useful information came from a letter Gakane had found in the sage's residence.

It was ridiculous that they survived and made substantial contact with the Star of Nagrans, but there was no significant concern as the second Cavalry recruitment had begun and was shaking the internal structure of the Star of Nagrans.

‘All things considered, everything is rolling along quite well.’

Yuder, who had calmly assessed the situation surrounding the Cavalry, turned his gaze toward a tactical game board placed amid a pile of documents. No pieces were visible on the board, which as always was simply left vacant.

‘Placing that board there without actually playing the game... is that a sign he’s not forgetting what happened that day?’

Kishiar hadn't changed noticeably since hearing the story of the past. He was still, if not more so, efficiently going about all tasks without a single mistake.

It seemed like he no longer had nightmares about when Yuder died, and there were no immediate issues at hand. Yet for some reason, that pristine tactical game board, which never disappeared from the cluttered desk, bothered Yuder more than usual today.

Just as he was about to say something, Kishiar spoke first.

"By the way, I received a message earlier. His Majesty will be able to come tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, you say?"

"Yes. I should go about my daily life as usual, so I won't be coming out to greet our 'unimportant guest'. I'll leave the reception to my assistant. Take good care of it."

This meant that Emperor Keilusa, who had decided to receive ability training from Yuder, would be making a covert visit to the Cavalry tomorrow. After a few days of seeming quietude for coordination, it appeared that the schedule had finally been settled.

Yuder nodded in acknowledgment. Faced with the Emperor's secret visit and the crucial task of training, any trivial questions were promptly pushed aside.

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A new day had dawned.

Before the Cavalry headquarters, carriages laden with stacks of applications had lined up, even before the morning sun had risen. The shouts of members who had rushed out without even washing their faces filled the training ground, echoing behind laborers busily moving boxes of applications.

Despite winter, robust cries unabatedly filled the air, accompanied by sporadic small explosions. The scene flowed like interlocking gears, brimming with energy.

Two men sat in a carriage at the end of the line, watching the bustling spectacle. A young man adorned in a luxurious hat and coat, wearing glasses, sat beside an elderly man serving him respectfully. Though they appeared to be just another noble and his dignified butler, they were, in fact, Emperor Keilusa La Orr and his chief attendant Yuliver. Both had disguised their appearances through magic artifacts.

"The line of carriages ahead doesn't seem to be moving fast. I hope you're not too bored," said Yuliver.

"It's fine. Watching the training is more interesting than I thought. The atmosphere is a bit too intense, though," the Emperor responded.

The scene beyond the metal fence of the training ground was indeed ferocious. Two teams were engaged in a game, vying for control of a single red ball. The intense struggle more closely

resembled a brawl than a training exercise, as men covered in dirt and grime flew at each other with a vengeance.

One of the members managed to snatch the red ball and began to run like a wild beast on all fours. Immediately, others chased after him. A shower of light arrows suddenly rained down between them, causing the ground to explode. The one who had fired the arrows was a team member wearing the same colored armor as the one holding the ball.

Dirt flying in all directions was deflected by an invisible shield, while a sharp wind blew away any lingering flames. Harsh criticisms and shouts ripped through the air.

Watching this ferocious spectacle, the Emperor took a sip of the warm tea that Yuliver had prepared. A small magic heater ensured the inside of the carriage remained cozy.

As the carriage wheels slowly turned, the view outside the window shifted accordingly. The Emperor's gaze wandered toward the grand structure appearing beyond the entrance of the Cavalry headquarters.

‘Just like Kishiar's taste,’ he mused.

Before the building had been erected, the Emperor had seen the drawings Kishiar had personally designed and brought forward. Even though much time had passed since the Cavalry had been established, the image had lingered in the Emperor's mind. Seeing it come to life was somewhat surreal.

"Your Majesty, once this place is built, please visit at least once," Kishiar had pleaded during a time when debates over the establishment of the Cavalry raged among the nobility. Back then, the Emperor had considered the possibility that he might die without ever seeing the building. Up until recently, that thought had not changed.

Yet now, he sat there, without any pain, physically witnessing the building of the Cavalry headquarters.

Who could understand the freedom, the miraculous novelty that this realization bestowed upon him?

Knock, knock.

Just then, a knock came from outside the carriage. The line of carriages that had been in front had disappeared, leaving the Emperor's carriage at the forefront.

When Yuliver opened the door, a chilly wind rushed in.

The Emperor locked eyes with a Cavalry member standing upright in a neat black uniform. The man had pale skin and black hair, and he stood there in the cold as if he were a glass figure, devoid of any emotional fluctuation. He bowed his head in greeting.

"Is it the Count Elliot who is scheduled to visit the Cavalry today?"

"Yes, that is correct."

The steward answered on behalf of the Count.

"My name is Yuder Aile, the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry. Please refer to me as Sir Aile. On behalf of the Cavalry and its Commander, I extend a warm welcome to our guests."

The name Count Elliot was, of course, an alias. Despite knowing that the Emperor had come in disguise, Yuder's unflappable demeanor was strikingly bold.

Impressed by Yuder's composure, the Emperor descended from the carriage, supported by his attendant. The view of the Cavalry was far more splendid up close than it had seemed from within the carriage. Unconsciously, the Emperor muttered as he looked up at the building.

"Indeed... this is the Cavalry."

"Correct, Count Elliot. The entirety of the Cavalry is open to you. If there is any place you'd like to visit or anything you're curious about while you're here, please feel free to ask."

Yuder's polite response seemed to lift the Emperor's mood. Perhaps he'd been waiting for it.

"Very well. Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule, Sir Aile."

The Emperor cheerfully took the lead, and Yuder and the attendant followed him into the main entrance.

Yuder guided the disguised Emperor throughout the various areas of the Cavalry. The Emperor, who must have largely recovered his stamina by now, showed no signs of fatigue. When something caught his eye, he would pause to observe it or ask questions without hesitation. He appeared more like an elegant young scholar engrossed in his studies than the ruler of a nation.

"What are these chain-like objects used for?"

"They are weights that our members wear on their limbs to build strength."

"And those plants growing out of the walls indoors?"

"They're medicinal herbs cultivated by our medical division's pharmacist."

"I've never seen such herbs before."

Thinking about it, Emperor Katchian in his past life had never toured the Cavalry this way. The meticulous attention of Emperor Keilusa, who spared no detail, reminded Yuder that he was indeed Kishiar's kin.

Even if the Emperor had known what the Cavalry was like from letters and various information, seeing it in person must have been a different experience.

Having satisfied his curiosity, the Emperor eventually went to meet Nipollen, a kitten that had become something of a local celebrity in the central corridor of the unit.

"Is this kitten truly Nipollen Van Tain, the fifth son of the Tain Family?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"I wouldn't know just by looking."

As the Emperor mumbled, the kitten, perched on the railing, briefly opened its green eyes and perked up its ears. Recognizing the Awakener, the kitten wound its tiny tail around Yuder's hand before letting go.

"Ah, hello."

"Is that... a greeting?"

The Emperor asked curiously.

"In the words of First Son Pruelle, yes. He said it's good to respond, so I have been. Others in the Cavalry also reciprocate the greeting."

Yuder replied, implying that he was not the only one who returned the peculiar greeting. The corners of the Emperor's mouth twitched up slightly in amusement. The attendant couldn't help but laugh outright.

"The Cavalry is indeed a fascinating place. A place where you must reciprocate a kitten's greeting, hmm?"

At that moment, Nipollen flicked its tail toward the palm of the Emperor.

"Are you trying to greet me now?"

"Yes. You might need to come a little closer."

"I wonder if that's advisable."

Emperor Keilusa hesitated briefly before taking a step closer and extending the back of his hand toward the cat. Nipollen curled its tail around the Emperor's wrist for a moment before releasing it.

Breaking the brief silence, the Emperor slowly opened his mouth to respond.

"Greeting each other is a good thing. May your day be always filled with blessings."

Nipollen tilted its head and let out a soft mew. It was amusing to see a fully grown man solemnly and warmly greeting a cat the size of his palm, yet the atmosphere around them grew warmer.

"You're not greeting me, I see. I can return greetings well too, you know." Yuliver chuckled.

"Nipollen is fond of Awakeners and keeps its distance from others."

"How fascinating. To be able to discern that..."

Just then, footsteps echoed from downstairs, revealing the presence of someone. Ever and Kanna ascended side by side, stopping in surprise when they saw Yuder and the Emperor's entourage.

"Yuder?"

Yuder briefly explained that he was escorting a visitor to the Cavalry without mentioning the Emperor's name.

"Ah, I see."

Accepting the explanation, they both nodded, then took out what appeared to be a homemade cushion from their bag and placed it on the stair railing.

"Look, Nippy. Your favorite red cushion. Ever made it new. Do you like it?"

The cat, which had recently shown increased interest in new objects, got up from its spot and moved to the new cushion. It rubbed its body against the cushion and let out a tiny mew, causing Ever to smile slightly.

"It looks like it likes it. That's good."

"We'll be going then, Yuder. See you later."

After the two left and some time had passed, the Emperor spoke again.

"Those two were Deputy Commanders for Shin and Jung Divisions, weren't they?"

"Yes, that's correct."

"Even in the presence of a stranger, there's no sense of guard or retreat. Is this the usual atmosphere here?"

Watching Nipollen reach out its paws as if trying to grab something from the air, Yuder gave a slight nod.

"Yes."

"Such an atmosphere cannot be artificially created. The Commander's capability is truly remarkable."

Though his expression remained largely unchanged, Yuder sensed that the Emperor was in quite a good mood. The Emperor gazed at the cushion where Nipollen lay for a moment before declaring that he'd like to get down to the day's agenda.

They headed to an indoor training room that Yuder had previously reserved.

"We will be training together in this room."

"Smaller than I thought. Will others not enter?"

"This indoor training room is reserved for specific individuals, so for the next three hours, no one else will come."

"Three hours, huh."

"Sir Yuliver, please wait outside. During the training, I would prefer that the other attendants not enter as well."

To the outside eye, the Emperor was accompanied only by a single chief attendant. However, Yuder sensed the presence of about five hidden knights. Casually revealing this awareness, the older chief attendant's eyes sharpened.

"As expected from Baron Aile. Understood, Sir."

Retreating, his gaze carried a sense of trust and satisfaction toward Yuder.

"Let's get started then. Please, have a seat here."

As commanded by the Emperor, he took a seat in the chair. Yuder pulled another chair closer so they could face each other.

After briefly examining the Emperor's transformed face, Yuder was the first to speak.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Compared to before, quite well. I have no pains."

"That's good to hear."

"Although we call it training, I have no idea how to refine such an ability. What method will you choose?"

"The abilities of Count Elliot can be closely categorized as 'Jung' if we were to sort them within the Cavalry Divisions. It's the ability to read information through a medium."

It wasn't like Kanna, who could directly read information from the subject she touched. However, he could hear distant conversations and see his surroundings through an object imbued with his power. It was an ability with enormous potential.

"To stabilize and further develop your power, the first step is to accurately gauge your current level and limitations. That's what we will focus on today."

"Current level and limitations, you say."

"You may find it physically demanding. If you feel it's too difficult, you can stop at any time."

"Very well. I'm looking forward to it."

"Then first, let me get the materials ready."

As Yuder extended his hand, miscellaneous items in the training room began to tremble as if caught in the wind. Soaring into the air as if drawn by telekinesis, they silently arranged themselves neatly on the table. The Emperor was secretly a bit astonished.

To manipulate objects so delicately with just wind. Even a skilled wind mage would find this challenging.

"Count, I've heard you've only imbued your power into one or two items momentarily. Is that correct?"

"That's right."

"Would you now imbue your power into all of these objects?"

"All of them?"

"Yes. Not a single one should be left out."

The demonic trainer of the Cavalry issued the Emperor his first training task.

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Three hours after the Emperor entered the training room.

The chief attendant, who had been sitting quietly outside, sprang to his feet at the sound of the door opening. The first to emerge was Yuder Aile, looking no different than when he had entered.

"Is the training session over?"

"Yes, it's finished."

"And what of the Count?"

"He is resting inside. He expressed a desire to leave quietly without any escort, so I'm taking my leave first."

"I see. How did the training go?"

While the Emperor was of concern, the chief attendant was equally curious about how the initial training session had gone. But the training room was so soundproofed that one couldn't even guess what had transpired inside.

Hearing the chief attendant's heartfelt question, Yuder answered obediently.

"It went exceptionally well. To be honest, I thought it might be impossible to complete everything in three hours. I now realize I worried too much."

"Is that so!"

A relieved smile brightened the chief attendant's face, and his eyes, usually stern, moistened slightly. However, he quickly reined in his emotions and bowed deeply.

"You've worked hard."

"Yes, let's meet again at the same time tomorrow."

Exchanging farewells, Yuder walked quietly down the corridor and disappeared from view. Eagerly entering the training room, the chief attendant saw the Emperor lying listlessly among the scattered debris on the floor. His eyes widened in surprise.

"My Lord, why are you lying there?"

He had watched over the Emperor since he was a first-born prince toddling around, but he had never seen him so carelessly sprawled on the floor. Unlike his energetic brother, the Emperor had always been more of a composed and elegant type, preferring to sit and read.

"Ah, Yuliver."

The Emperor, a beat too slow, called out the chief attendant's name. He declined the help to rise and spoke listlessly.

"The floor is quite cool; it's not so bad. No one else is looking, so let me lie here for a moment."

"But what kind of training has exhausted you to this extent? Baron Aile mentioned it went very well."

"Did he say that?"

The Emperor chuckled lightly, a wisp of sweat-soaked hair falling across his forehead, making him look strangely unfamiliar.

"Yes, didn't he?"

"Rather than doing well, it was more like clinging to the edge of a cliff while a merciless beast prodded me. I barely hung on."

"Excuse me?"

A beast? A cliff? These were utterly baffling terms to the chief attendant. The Emperor muttered softly.

"I always thought that the harshest teacher I would ever encounter in my life was my mother, who personally taught me horseback riding... It seems the old saying 'there's always a sky above a mountain' holds true."

Three hours. In some respects, a very short time.

But in the three hours he had spent in the training room with Yuder, the Emperor felt as if time had stretched to almost five times its length.

During that time, Yuder had pushed the Emperor to his limits in every conceivable way. He had activated abilities in dozens of objects, hurled them out the window with the force of the wind so they wouldn't be seen by others, all while making the Emperor feel the limits of those activated powers. And that was just the beginning.

While simultaneously perceiving information from dozens of locations, Yuder recited spells to the Emperor. Waves of nausea washed over him, and his head throbbed as if it would split open. Yet he never blinked, giving the Emperor a series of commands.

"You should be able to handle this much at your current level. Even the Cavalry initially claimed it would be difficult, but my judgments have never been wrong. The sensation you find difficult is akin to muscle soreness from wielding an unfamiliar power. Don't be fooled."

"Think of your power as an extension of your own limbs. When people move their fingers or toes, they don't have to consciously think about it. Why then do you struggle so much with these newfound abilities?"

"Try it one more time. If it doesn't work this time, take a sip of water and try again."

The option to simply give up did not exist for him. When asked where the water was, Yuder created water with a flick of his finger, levitating it in a shape resembling a cup before handing it to the Emperor. It was the first time the Emperor had ever drunk water created in such a manner.

Observing Yuder effortlessly manipulate the stream of water at just the right temperature without spilling a single drop, the Emperor suddenly realized the stark difference in their ability to control their powers. Yuder Aile was truly someone who could perfectly control his abilities. When he demonstrated as much, there was no room left for excuses.

Before Yuder's dispassionate gaze, which seemed to trample any feeble excuses, the Emperor rallied all his willpower and patience. He had endured enough pain to become sick of it. What was one more round of training?

Nonetheless, at the end, his senses were so scrambled that he couldn't tell whether he was in a training room or some unknown outdoor training ground. Finally, he collapsed under the table. Sweat poured down like rain, and he felt like his insides were flipping over. Yet, scraping along the floor, he managed to complete the final task. A sense of accomplishment unlike any other surged through the Emperor's heart. It felt like waking up from a demonic trance.

"As I told you, you'd be able to do it. You've completed it all in precisely three hours."

Beside the panting Emperor, Yuder spoke briefly. There were no pleasantries or apologies for the Emperor's hardship. No unnecessary personal conversations took place either. Nevertheless, the Emperor found his impartial attitude very refreshing.

Unlike with others, lying on the floor in his presence didn't make the Emperor feel humiliated or ashamed. In front of Yuder's straightforward attitude and firm guidance, the Emperor felt like he was not the ruler but simply Keilusa La Orr, an individual, for the first time in a very long while.

Clearly, just as Kishiar had said, Yuder was an exceptional Awakener and a magnificent trainer. He was in no way inadequate to be the Emperor's mentor.

The time the Emperor had to personally train under Yuder was not long, and he planned to make full use of the brief respite by spending even more time here tomorrow.

Though the thought made his limbs quiver in anticipation, the Emperor felt a mix of excitement and regret.

'Kishiar, I know you have your plans, but don't leave such a talent buried in obscurity any longer,' the Emperor thought.

Yuder Aile might be a figure whose name would eternally resound through history. That was a premonition he had felt as a scholar who loved history long before he became Emperor. He sensed that neither one's social standing, age, nor any other constraint would hold back such a person.

As he pondered why such a brilliant individual would walk a difficult path, tarnished by scandal alongside his own brother, the Emperor grew increasingly troubled. The more he thought about it, the more he felt that there must be some special reason that bound his brother to Yuder, which left him with a bittersweet sentiment.

‘Choice is, after all, a two-way street.’

How could one control the emotions directed toward another? Emperor Keilusa knew this better than anyone else.

Both the brother he valued and the prodigy he admired occupied his thoughts, as he let out a small sigh.

...

"Your Grace, a letter from the Crown Prince has arrived. He was particularly anxious about hearing your response to the message he sent you earlier."

"Why is he so restless about my opinion now? I will look at the letter later; you may leave it."

Duke Diarca stared coldly at the letter from the Crown Prince that his servant had handed over. Ignoring an imperial letter was a breach of protocol, but who would dare to correct Duke Diarca?

The nobles seated beside the Duke did not worry as they observed the Crown Prince's letter being treated like a trifling matter.

"You did well, Your Grace. The Crown Prince didn't even consider you during the audience. Now he seems rather anxious."

"Until last year, I heard he was quite discerning and even held you in higher regard than his own flesh and blood. I wonder who has poisoned his ear."

"Is it really someone else's doing? One can't blame the gardener if the seed is rotten."

At that metaphor, a hushed laughter filled the room, mingled with the scent of intoxicating herbs.

Taking a deep drag from his long pipe filled with herbal mixtures, Duke Diarca exhaled the smoke and mumbled,

"One can't simply let it wither and die. Annoying as it is, I'll have to trim the branches and fertilize it. I need to find some suspects involved in the invasion of the Sun Palace and hand them over."

"You're truly merciful."

Sincere praises flowed from various corners. Suddenly, one among them spoke up as if recalling something.

"Speaking of which, it was quite noisy on the road here today. Apparently, it's due to the recruitment of the Cavalry."

"Ah, I noticed too. Duke Peletta seems to be over the moon these days. It's unbearably noisy; when will it end?"

The nobles, aggrieved by the recent activities, took turns railing against the Cavalry recruitment and Duke Peletta. Since Duke Diarca was occupied with smoking his strong herbal mixture and did not stop them, their criticisms became increasingly harsh.

"Do you really think they can be selective when they're recruiting on such a massive scale? I heard they wouldn't notice even if a pig joined, not to mention a human."

"Haha, that's amusing. Should I send my lowest stableman there? I wonder if they would recognize him."

"I should join the bet too."

"I'll add my share. It's the perfect opportunity to send in the dwarf clown I just hired."

"Hahaha."

"Duke Diarca, Your Grace. Would you care to join us?"

When someone boldly broke the silence, everyone momentarily paused. The man who had raised this significant topic was Baron Renbow, responsible for coordinating with the Crown Prince's healers.

Duke Diarca, who had been puffing away at his pipe, nonchalantly asked, "Doesn't sound like an entertaining topic. Is there a reason for bringing this up?"

"If you're just going to send some stable hand, it wouldn't be interesting, of course. But isn't this the perfect time to plant eyes and ears within the Cavalry?"

"You think I hadn't considered that when I heard about the recruitment, Renbow? Finding an Awakener suitable for such a long-term mission is quite challenging. You'd need someone you've known for at least five years to trust them with the task. Those guys have only been around for two years. It'd be less risky to wait for the new recruits and win them over."

"Of course, Your Grace the Duke would have thought much deeper than I have. But haven't you forgotten something? The healers you met recently are also Awakeners, ever ready to serve you."

At that, everyone fell silent. Duke Diarca removed the pipe from his lips and tapped out the ashes as he inquired, "Renbow, upon reflection, was this suggestion not yours but rather proposed by them first?"

"Haha, I won't deny it."

Sly foxes, thought Duke Diarca, his gaze fixed on Renbow but tinged with a cold interest.

After a brief pause, Duke Diarca slowly nodded his head.

"Fine. After meeting them before, my interest was piqued as well. Go ahead and proceed as you see fit."

Chapter 594

Yuder finished his daily tasks and sat down in a chair upon entering his room.

Though he had completed his work outside, that didn't mean he could head straight to bed. With an impending departure from the capital, he needed to clean his room whenever he could afford the time.

‘Lately, there’s just so much stuff piling up.’

Dried flowers filled numerous vases, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. Drawers were overflowing with gifts that had come from all corners. Among them, of course, were the multitude of clothes and jewels that Kishiar had lavishly given him.

In his past life, Yuder had never felt that his room was too cramped no matter where he lived. But these days, his space felt increasingly unfamiliar due to the clutter.

‘But I have no intention of moving out.’

Yuder had little desire to leave, even after exceeding the allowed period of staying in the dormitory for his group. The only remaining option was to meticulously organize his belongings.

There was no need to reorganize the items he had received from Kishiar; those had already been shoved into the wardrobe. The current issue was the influx of gifts he had received since returning from the west.

Yuder began to sift through the hastily stored items. He sorted them by type; small objects were placed in boxes, and larger items were neatly arranged. Some particularly important items were set aside.

‘This brooch was from the Western Mage Union, and this pen was a gift from the Baron, representing the officials of the West...”...’

The brooch, embedded with a yellow magic stone, had come from Micalin Punt of the Western Mage Union. According to the letter, the yellow color symbolized the union, and the brooch had been engraved with a protective spell and the union's emblem that would be particularly useful for research in the Great Sarain Forest forest.

Though permanent usage was naturally impossible, the letter boasted that it would still prove useful, given the extra effort in its creation. At the very least, it seemed incomparable to the disposable protective bracelet he had received from Alik when he had experienced his second gender manifestation.

This gift held further significance considering it contained a magic stone from the newly discovered vein in the Great Sarain Forest.

‘Thanks to that discovery, the long-stalled process of dividing the boundaries within Great Sarain Forest is restarting.’

The Great Sarain Forest, whose abnormal growth had been halted, was currently being extensively logged. Once that was completed, the nations sharing the forest would reestablish their borders. The speed and efficiency with which the nations had come together, with the large vein as a focal point, was startling.

He had suspected as much, but even the nobles and historically allied western nations couldn’t ignore the opportunity to make a fortune. To secure even a slightly larger share of the magic stone vein, they would have to bow their heads to the Emperor of Orr, who had until now been underestimated. Emperor Keilusa wouldn’t miss this chance; by now, he was likely expanding his influence.

Yuder attached the brooch to the inner lining of his clothes. It looked like a useful item that could come in handy when he left the capital.

Next, the pen that the Baron had sent was not an ordinary quill; it was enchanted. Created to resemble the one Baron used, the nib was fortified against wear, and a grip made of fabric and wood added an element of luxury.

‘The magic on this pen turns water into ink.’

Under normal circumstances, a pen required a separate ink source, necessitating constant preparation. To mitigate this, a select few who wrote frequently used enchanted pens that could turn water into ink.

Of course, even that had its limitations. Despite its high cost, the item only had a half-year lifespan, leading some to label it a monumental waste. Yet, for someone in a position like the Baron, such inconveniences were trivial.

The top of the pen was elegantly engraved with the Baron's initials and the family crest. The mere existence of this pen would assure any ordinary officer that there was a close relationship between Yuder and the Baron.

‘I should definitely take this with me.’

Yuder picked up the pen. As he was organizing a few more items, a letter that had been mixed with the contents of a small box fell out.

‘What's this?’

It was a letter from Prince Ejain he had received not too long ago. Due to events with Kishiar, he had been too preoccupied to read it thoroughly and had forgotten about it after placing it in the drawer.

Yuder unfolded the letter from Prince Ejain. True to form, it was written in beautiful script and emitted a mysterious fragrance.

"To my esteemed friend, Yuder Aile,"

The content of the letter was not lengthy. Prince Ejain seemed to have successfully expanded his influence within Nelarn. This implied that, once the internal chaos of the country was resolved, he would ascend to the throne.

Ejain had written that once peace and laughter returned to the people of Nelarn, he wanted to establish a group similar to the Cavalry there.

"I already have loyal and virtuous Awakeners following me. I believe that they could form the cornerstone of such an organization. At that time, I plan to reach out for an alliance with the Cavalry."

Ejain seemed to be seriously contemplating his future reign. The emotions emanating from the letter felt peaceful and filled with newfound certainty.

"If you, Yuder Aile, who has guided me in thinking about the future and serves as the assistant to the Commander of the renowned Cavalry, could come here, the Awakeners of Nelarn would gain much strength. Although I do not know when, I hope you will consider this favorably."

Should Ejain request assistance in establishing an organization similar to the Cavalry, it would be beneficial for Yuder to maintain close relations with him.

If the day ever came for Yuder to visit, it wouldn't feel too unfamiliar. He had visited Nelarn a few times in his previous life.

Yuder silently read through to the postscript at the end.

"P.S. Not long ago, I suddenly had a fever that startled everyone. They thought I was poisoned, but it turned out that I had manifested my second gender—Alpha. Although I'm still adjusting to having a second gender, I believe I will get used to it soon."

Ejain was an Alpha, not surprising. From the letter alone, it was evident that he was adapting and developing well as an Awakener, so Yuder wasn't overly concerned for his future.

Ejain was capable enough to claim a throne and build an empire even when times were tough; now he had also gained truly loyal subordinates. The fact that he still called Yuder a friend made him slightly uncomfortable, but the time to correct that had long passed.

Yuder tucked the letter back into its place, contemplating the faint aroma it emitted, which perhaps came from Ejain's second gender. Even though the scent had largely dissipated over time, touching the paper gave him a tingling sensation that was hard to describe.

The scent was conveyed not only through the sense of smell but also through the skin. It seemed that Prince Ejain had just manifested his Alpha status and the aroma clung intensely to the letter he had written.

Yuder pondered for a moment before pulling out a piece of paper and began writing a reply with the Baron's pen. He penned the customary greetings he'd often used during his days as a Cavalry Commander, and filled the rest of the page with some cautionary advice he knew for a newly manifested Alpha.

‘...With this, I can consider repaying the compassion he showed me in my previous life.’

Handing it off to Kishiar would ensure that it would get sandwiched between the letters going to Nelarn.

Yuder placed the letter to be sent on the table.

The next day, Kishiar, who received the letter, responded cheerfully that he would deliver it well. Unbeknownst to him, he would be ensnared by the unexpected beauty that was Kishiar as he sipped his tea and stayed much longer than anticipated.

...

"Alright! Second regular meeting of the Intelligence Unit, commence!"

"Applause!"

Awkward clapping filled the recreation room as everyone heard Eldore siblings' shout.

"Devran, why aren't you clapping louder? Do it like Gakane."

"Why should I? Yuder didn't tell me to."

Devran questioned with a scrunched face.

"Just because it's fun? Anyway, I brought some snacks today, so let's talk while eating."

"Sure, we also have a special guest today."

Everyone's eyes turned toward the day's special guest, Kanna Wand. Kanna grinned and greeted them with an exaggerated aristocratic flair.

"Fine, you've all had these fabulous meetings without me, which I'm a bit envious of, but I'm included today, so it's alright. Hinn even brought me some butter cookies."

"Are they good?"

"Absolutely delicious. Where did you get these? From the Fifth Wall District?"

"Let's halt the small talk and focus now."

The room quickly quieted down at Yuder's words as he flipped through his documents. While his eyes still twinkled playfully, he looked around seriously at the Eldore siblings, special guest Kanna, a seemingly more tired but invigorated Gakane, and Devran, whose face had considerably tanned from sun exposure.

Except for Enon, who worked alone, today's meeting gathered all members of the Intelligence Unit. The meeting was a mid-term review organized for those who would soon vacate the capital to help the second recruitment of the Cavalry.

The main topics of the meeting were information sharing about the Star of Nagran and the sage, which was why Kanna had been specially invited.

"Firstly, if anyone has acquired new information since our last meeting, please share."

"Can I go first?"

Gakane timidly raised his hand.

"I felt like I haven't been contributing much since our last meeting, so I did some legwork. While I didn't find much about the sage, I did learn something about the southern tribe symbols that Yuder had asked us to investigate."

"Really? How?"

"I've had some interactions with people from the South recently. I asked them what I should do to learn more about the South, and they lent me a book. It was written by someone who visited the South about 15 years ago. Apparently, it's now out of print."

"Ah, really?"

Gakane placed the worn book on the table for everyone to see. The old cover didn't even display a title.

"After reading it, I found out which tribal symbol Yuder had sketched. It definitely belongs to the Ansuma Mehet tribe. In our language, it means 'Wolf's Eye.' It was traditionally the largest tribe in the South and even united the entire region to form a nation once."

Despite the busy schedule, Gakane's explanation flowed smoothly.

"And the author of this book assessed that this tribe is far more dangerous than any other in the South."

Chapter 595

"And the author of this book assessed that this tribe is far more dangerous than any other in the South."

Ansuma Mehet, the Wolf's Eye Tribe. The name that had been a hazy memory in Yuder's mind became crystal clear upon hearing Gakane's explanation.

'Ah yes, that was the name.'

"During the time this book was written, the Ansuma Mehet Tribe was the most influential in the South. Unlike other tribes who openly argued that they should return to the times before the 'Sand War,' they were unusually friendly toward northerners. But that's what made them more dangerous," Gakane said.

"The Sand War? That sounds somewhat familiar..."

"Why would their kindness make them more dangerous?"

Both Hinn Eldore and Devran asked simultaneously.

"Ah, well, if you're not from the South, you might not know. The Sand War was a conflict that erupted several centuries ago when the south invaded across the desert. Thanks to a treaty we won back then, the South haven't invaded past the desert since. There are still many war memorials and statues in the South," Gakane explained, sounding like he had an intimate knowledge of that war. Before finishing, he added a little awkwardly, "And the renowned general who led merely 100,000 troops to defeat a Southern army ten times their size in the Battle of Black Sands is actually my ancestor, Jureli Bolunwald."

"Oh, no wonder you know so much."

"You really do come from an illustrious family, don't you?"

Everyone was intrigued, but learning this fact didn't make them see Gakane as more distant or create an awkward atmosphere. Gakane, who might have been internally worried, sported a blooming smile on his face.

"I'll introduce you to all of it when we eventually visit the South. Anyway, the reason their kindness was perceived as more dangerous is easier to understand when you consider why the author went to the South in the first place."

According to Gakane, the person who wrote the book had been a low-ranking employee in a trading company in the Orr Empire. Upon hearing that an increasing number of merchants and engineers were traveling to the South for business expansion, he was dispatched as part of a group to evaluate new business opportunities.

Other tribal people did not hide their aversion or dislike toward these northerners. However, the Ansuma Mehet tribe was different. They treated the visitors from north of the desert with exceptional politeness.

Convinced by audacious offers of wealth and honor in return for advancing trade and technology, many chose to stay.

The owner of the company where the author worked was swayed by these offers and decided to set up a new branch there. Employees complied with the Southerners' requests, teaching them arithmetic and the language of the Empire.

The author also taught the Imperial language to the children, and surprisingly excelled in this, gaining many Southerner friends. Eventually, through an introduction, he even began to teach the

future chieftain's son. This experience became the turning point that made the author rethink his decision to stay long-term in the South.

"Now, look at this part."

Yuder's gaze fell on the section Gakane pointed out.

'- It was one day while I was teaching the chieftain's son, Surme. The chieftain's house was unusually noisy. When I asked Surme the reason for the commotion, he said it was just the usual and not to be concerned. However, I sneaked over during my break. What I saw there were people from the Maladi Trading Company, who had boasted of becoming wealthy by settling in the South years before us.'

People from the Maladi upper echelons had said they made a fortune by introducing imperial water facilities and magic stone lighting systems to the southern countries. However, when the author met them again, they were furious, claiming they had lost everything in a moment due to fraud by their southern partners.

"The tribal people responded very kindly to that anger. According to them, it wasn't fraud but rather a consequence of clauses clearly specified when they began their partnership. It was a loss that the Maladi people had to take responsibility for. To anyone watching, the tribal people's account seemed accurate. The Maladi upper echelons eventually fled the southern countries a few days later. They were soon forgotten."

Among those who remained in the southern countries, including the author's colleagues, the people from the north didn't seem to care much about this incident. Their minds were filled with thoughts of making big money as quickly as possible in the southern lands. However, the author felt uneasy, recalling the son of the future chieftain saying that this was 'a common occurrence.'

When the incident repeated for the second time, the author eerily realized that there had been no northern desert dwellers who had stayed in the south for over 10 years.

"It might be a coincidence, but I had a bad feeling. My colleagues thought I was a coward. They taunted me, suggesting I was scared of the Black Moon faith of the southern people. Nevertheless, I decided to follow my mother's advice to always trust my instincts."

Unable to bear his unease, the author eventually returned to the Empire alone, dismissing the objections of his superiors, citing health reasons. He then compiled the diaries and records he had kept at that time into a travelogue. That was this very book.

"He was wise not to ignore his gut feelings."

Yuder concluded after listening to Gakane's story.

"Even though it was written 15 years ago, there are quite a few points that worry me when reading this book in the current situation. From my research, the merchants who went there almost all failed and came back just as the author had feared. Those who returned claimed they had been robbed of their business foundations and technologies."

"So they acted friendly but took everything they could."

"Exactly. And this Black Moon faith they believe in also concerns me. I didn't know much about their doctrine apart from the stories in the scriptures, but upon investigating, I found that even the old Sand War was supposedly instigated on the surface by this religious doctrine. There, the Goddess of the Black Moon is claimed to be the rightful ruler of the world. They argue that the Sun God stole her rightful place and it needs to be reclaimed."

"Knowing this now, it's easier to speculate about the true nature of those southern merchants."

Kanna spoke clearly.

"The hostile southern forces are hiding their identities while roaming around the Empire looking for opportunities. They've been strengthening internally for over a decade without spreading much information externally. Their intentions are absolutely, absolutely, absolutely not good."

"Do you think they're planning to wage another war like in the past?"

Devran asked with a furrowed brow.

"We can't be sure yet. All we can do is dig deeper since we've reported what we've found."

"Gakane, good job. It seems you've brought back valuable information."

Yuder quietly praised Gakane.

"If we hadn't known that they are currently meddling with the House of Tain and the Star of Nagran, we might have unknowingly established diplomatic relations with them in a few years, just like those merchants did."

And so, the atmosphere grew tense, each contemplating the implications of what they had just learned.

"Could it have come to that? Still, I'm glad it was of some help."

What seems unlikely now was a reality that the Orr Empire in Yuder's previous life had faced. Yuder thought that the hardships the Orr Empire would've experienced after his death probably weren't much different from the accounts of travel journals about various traders brought by Gakane.

'War.'

War may be fought with swords and blood, but the present Southerners seemed to have learned that money could be more terrifying than a blade. Their ease in donning the masks of merchants to infiltrate the Empire was likely due to the events of that time when those travel journals were written.

Unable to hide his delight, Yuder lightly patted Gakane's flushed shoulder and asked him to continue his investigation.

"I'll report next," Devran raised his hand, a tinge of jealousy coloring his face. Having skipped training sessions to work diligently in a store near the inn where the Star of Nagran had stayed, he'd managed to pick up some rumors.

Access to gossip about the sages in the imperial palace had been limited, but he still found something valuable.

"Local merchants have been saying that recently some suspicious figures have been lurking in Fifth Wall District. I suspect they're Nahan and his associates. I've been extra diligent in my search

because I believe they're staying somewhere near Fifth Wall District so they'll know immediately when the sage arrives. And I've found..."

"Did you locate their hideout?"

"Not exactly, but I found a fruit store they frequently visit. So, I switched jobs to that store. The owner of the previous store was quite sad to see me go, but—"

"Devran, you haven't forgotten that you're part of the Cavalry, have you?"

"Of course not! Anyway, I didn't find Nahan, but I did find individuals who are suspected Awakeners!"

It wasn't concrete information, but it was still significant progress. Yuder equally commended Devran.

Next up were the Eldore siblings. They proudly reported that they had intruded into the sage's lodging and brought back items that helped Kanna decode information.

"Now that we know the owner of that leather strap Gakane found is a noble named Renbow, I'm planning to tail him for a while," said one of the Eldore siblings.

"Guess it's finally my turn," Kanna put down the snack she had been munching on and dusted off her hands.

"I've roughly succeeded in determining the abilities of the Awakeners from the Star of Nagran who were staying at the lodging, using the items you guys brought. But there are some cases where I couldn't decipher their names, so just bear that in mind."

With her more refined skills, Kanna proceeded to read the information embedded in the items.

"First, there's an Awakener who can control animals in a manner similar to infection. This person could potentially control humans through animals. Then there's someone who can make a certain place invisible, useful for both protection and confinement. There's also someone who can borrow the vision of a specific target to see distant places, and another who can temporarily combine different abilities."

"Wow, each one of them is formidable. Clearly, they didn't come this far for nothing," Devran said, chuckling incredulously.

"And the last person is a bit of a mystery... This person's ability was the hardest to read. At first, I thought maybe they had a variety of powers or something that mimicked multiple abilities."

"So, what's the reality?"

"I hit a wall there. So instead of just relying on my ability, I thought it would be better to consult Gayle and Doyle, who are in the Cavalry, and corroborate based on the attire of the sages we've observed so far. With Hinn and Finn's help, I did just that. And Gayle and Doyle mentioned an individual with a very intriguing ability."

"Intriguing ability?"

"Yes. Someone who can copy the abilities of others."

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The atmosphere shifted dramatically when it was mentioned that the Awakener could copy others' powers. Gakane furrowed his eyebrows and cautiously asked,

"So, you mean they can imitate the abilities of other Awakeners? Isn't that the most dangerous power?"

"Yes, exactly. But according to Gayle and Doyle, it's not as formidable as it sounds because it has some weaknesses."

"Ah, is it complex to control?"

"That's part of it. Also, the copied abilities are significantly weaker than the originals. For instance, if he were to mimic an ability like Gayle and Doyle's sword aura, the copied version would be weaker and have a shorter duration."

"I see... Well, naturally, someone with the original power would be stronger then."

"It doesn't seem that easy to just go around copying abilities. If it's that taxing to use even one, attempting more would be out of the question... Besides, it doesn't sound like he has a great reputation."

The person who interjected was Yuder. His eyes seemed even more contemplative than usual. Whenever Yuder had that look, it was as though he was gazing at something far beyond what any of the members could see. Kanna thought this but kept her observations to herself, nodding in agreement.

"Yes, you're right, as always, Yuder. Though I'm not sure about other things, his reputation really wasn't that great. Gayle and Doyle despised him. He would just take abilities that looked interesting to him without asking for consent. He even had a nickname—Copycat."

"Wow, hearing that nickname, I get why they disliked him. If someone copied our abilities and acted smug about it, I'd challenge them to a duel and drag them to the training grounds immediately!"

Finn wore a face of vehement agreement. Though no one said it out loud, everyone seemed to be pondering what they would do if someone copied their abilities.

No one would feel good about someone else copying something they possessed, especially if it were an inferior imitation.

Moreover, in a closed and diverse group like the Star of Nagran, such an ability would be even less welcome. Its perceived triviality made sense when considering how dangerous it could become, depending on its application and development.

"So, who is this person among the sage's party? What do they look like? Did you find out their name?" Devran asked, nearly out of breath.

"Yes. He has a long scar on one ear. His name is Diemon."

'As I suspected.'

Yuder's eyes darkened even more.

The Diemon he knew now was entirely different from the Diemon he remembered from his past life. This Diemon was youthfully vibrant and timidly followed the true sage who led the Star of Nagran. If not for that prominent scar on his ear, it would have been difficult to identify him as the same person.

The ability Yuder originally knew Diemon to possess was merely manipulation of emotions. But none of that power's traces were found in the abilities used during the recent Sun Palace incursion.

There were only two plausible explanations for all of this.

First, the real ability Diemon had was different from what Yuder originally knew.

Second, Diemon gained a new second ability after the internal collapse of the Star of Nagran.

And now, the revealed truth seemed to lean toward the first option.

'If he can copy others' abilities, then it would be possible for a young man to age, or for him to manifest powers different from what I remember. There would be no fixed ability, per se.'

In that case, what he told Yuder—that his ability was to alter other people's emotions—wasn't an outright lie after all.

'He never used any other power from the moment he first made his name known in his previous life until the day he died. He must have had some reason why he couldn't use anything but that particular ability.'

He still didn't know what that reason was, but now that he was closer to the truth about him, he felt assured that he could prevent future disasters before they happened.

"Is Diemon the only one the brothers have figured out?"

"There's one more. A man with glasses. They say he goes by the name 'Nezo'. He has been a close confidant of the sage for a very long time. It seems he wasn't particularly friendly with the brothers, so I couldn't get any more useful information out of him."

Kanna reported that this man appeared to have an ability related to long-distance vision. It was a shame that they didn't find out more, but even this much was a significant achievement. Knowing at least the types of abilities they were up against ensured that they could handle whatever came their way.

‘The help of one person specialized in information really does make a difference.’

However, it wasn't to say that the other informants were inferior to Kanna. Her ability wasn't absolute, after all.

Kanna's skills shined brightest when she was given sufficient material to read. Conversely, her abilities waned when there was nothing to analyze.

So, it was only logical to expand their intelligence unit for long-term strategy, considering she couldn't go out and collect minute details due to her lack of physical strength.

‘Right now, we have fewer than ten people in the intelligence unit, but once we establish branches, we'll be able to recruit more. Then we'll have eyes and ears all across the empire.’

Awakeners with various abilities would effectively exert their powers not just within the Empire, but globally, gathering all sorts of information. This was just the beginning.

Keeping his thoughts about the distant future to himself and maintaining a calm exterior, Yuder expressed his gratitude to Kanna.

"Thank you, Kanna. This will be extremely helpful for what we have planned next."

"Don't mention it. If it weren't for the materials and information brought by everyone here, I wouldn't have been able to read so much. We have interconnected tasks, so it's best to help each other out!"

Kanna was well aware of the limitations of her own abilities. With a softer look in his eyes, Yuder glanced over at Kanna and the other informants, then shared some things they should be aware of.

"I've learned some things myself, so I'll share them here. Remember everything you've heard today and make sure you don't forget."

The information Yuder shared was concise. He was now completely certain that the perpetrators behind the invasion of the Sun Palace were from the sage's entourage, and behind them was the Diarca family. He also mentioned that they had recently come face-to-face for the first time.

"Wow... so it was them after all."

"Hold on, then the recent announcement from Prince Katchian that they were taking on the mission to capture the perpetrators of the Sun Palace invasion is...?"

Quick to catch on, the faces of those who had figured out the implications behind Yuder's information subtly changed. Considering their complicated feelings, Yuder calmly spoke first.

"I can't go into details, but the Crown Prince didn't take on this mission with full knowledge of the situation. Regardless, now that he's involved, there's likely to be tension between the Diarca family and Crown Prince Katchian for a while. I don't think this will have negative implications for His Majesty the Emperor or our Commander. We should just focus on doing what we have to do."

The atmosphere shifted distinctly at the mention of Duke Diarca and the Crown Prince. The only commonality in everyone's expression was the absolute absence of goodwill.

For most, political issues still seemed like a complex narrative from a distant land, yet the memory of Duke Diarca and his cohorts from the last Cavalry party lingered deeply. So deeply, in fact, that since that day, the name "Duke Diarca" had become almost as infamous within the Cavalry as the Imperial Knights.

In simpler terms, people had grown to dislike him so much that they started changing the names of their training targets and balls to mock him.

'Ever since we used that half-hearted apology from Baron Durmand as a training target, we've really learned something...'

If word got out that they were using such disrespectful tactics during training, there'd be hell to pay. But frankly, Yuder didn't mind the growing audacity among the members.

"Most of you already know, but I'll be leaving the capital soon to assist the Commander in the second recruitment of members," Yuder said, locking eyes with each of the intelligence officers, his gaze full of resolve.

"I'll be prepared to return at any moment if the situation in the capital changes. But for that, I'll need your help. So, please take good care of things while I'm away."

In the past, leaving the capital teeming with enemies wouldn't have been an option. If Kishiar wasn't present, and Yuder was also gone, who would handle any unforeseen crises?

But now, it seemed feasible.

Even in Yuder's absence, he was confident that everyone would perform their roles adequately.

Hadn't he trained them rigorously for just such occasions?

'Still, just to be safe, I should intensify the training schedule before I leave.'

Unaware of Yuder's thoughts, the intelligence unit members smiled broadly, moved by his words. Yuder too felt content, contemplating new training methods for them.

Thus, the intelligence unit meeting concluded in a warm and cordial atmosphere.

"Yuder, a moment," Kanna said as the meeting dispersed, skillfully pulling Yuder aside. She spoke in a low voice, too soft for anyone else to hear. "I think the bait I threw at Count Gallon, who claims he wants to play my father's role, might catch something."

"Information about Karl Enfile?"

"Yes. You should've seen how he raged at my audacity, only to reconsider and start pleading. Anyway, I'll let you know when I'm certain."

"Understood."

"Oh, and about Hosanna. Ever since meeting the Commander, he's been deep in thought. It might just be a matter of time before he opens up. Should we push him a little? What do you think?"

"If you think it's necessary, go ahead. I trust you."

"Mmm. I appreciate your trust, but shaking Hosanna was initially the Commander's success, so I'm hesitant to intervene further. How did he even manage to do what even I couldn't? Could he actually possess some kind of persuasive power? Well, if it's him, it's possible..."

In truth, Kishiar wasn't the first to try shaking Hosanna. Kanna, who had been responsible for him all along, was the first to attempt it but to no avail. Eventually, they had to rely on Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman.

'I never doubted that Kishiar would be successful, but it was surprisingly effective...'

"...By the way, Yuder."

Kanna was mid-sentence when her eyes suddenly widened upon seeing Yuder's face, as if she had seen something unbelievable.

"You look... happier? Could it be because I mentioned the Commander?"

"..."

"No, no! You don't have to answer!"

Just as Yuder was about to speak, Kanna raised her hand to stop him, and swiftly stepped back. Moments later, she hastily offered her goodbyes, saying she had remembered something she needed to do, and then vanished.

"..."

Was he actually happier? Yuder asked himself.

'It seems so.'

The truth was, he had arrived last to the Intelligence Unit's meeting today because he had lost track of time, utterly entranced by Kishiar's face and lingering over his tea.

It was unlike him, as he always prided himself on moving quicker and arriving earlier than everyone else. But strangely, he wasn't angry about it. Love seemed to have a paralyzing effect on his rationality, to the point that it became frightening.

To be honest, even at this moment, he wanted to see Kishiar.

Chapter 597

Time flew by at an insane pace as he took care of various matters before leaving the capital. Even when he managed just the bare minimum amount of sleep, the days felt insufficient.

He increased the training intensity for the members, and personally supervised their condition. At the same time, he kept an eye on the progress of Thais Yulman's research and even found time to assess how to best utilize the mansions and lands that the Cavalry had won as prizes in the recent event.

The mansions were initially used as residences for important collaborators of the Cavalry, as well as for members who had rendered significant services. In one particularly serene and beautiful mansion in the Sixth Wall District, Hellem had already moved in with her pet Penpen. Near that mansion, Steiber, who had been living above a dilapidated bakery, relocated with his family.

Another mansion was soon to be formally allocated to Thais Yulman and Alik. Although Thais said he didn't care where he conducted his research, he didn't decline the offer of a more spacious and comfortable home at no cost.

The new site was located near the main headquarters of the Cavalry, on land hardly utilized by the Imperial Knights. Kishiar had already decided what buildings to erect on this land and swiftly brought in the engineers who had previously built the main headquarters to complete the foundation work.

Yuder patrolled the construction site with an air of discontent, driving away idle members of the Imperial Knights who had nothing better to do than look for trouble. Afterward, Yuder sought out Enon to update him on the whereabouts and abilities of the sage and his party.

These days, Enon was particularly on edge, juggling tasks between the intelligence unit and supervising the medicines made by Thais Yulman for Awakeners with second gender. Having conveyed all the necessary information, Yuder was about to leave when Enon caught him and made him ingest a horribly bitter energy stabilizer.

“...”

“Is it bitter?”

Fearing a backlash if he said it wasn't, Yuder simply nodded. A fierce smile appeared on Enon's face.

“I've taken some inspiration from the ingredients in the second gender stabilizer made by that mage Thais Yulman. It seems suitable for use as a stamina restorer.”

“Why give it to me?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’? Isn't it obvious? Someone mentioned you were late for a meeting because you were loitering around the Commander's office. I can guess what you've been up to, you know?”

“...”

How did he not get caught? Surely, one of the intelligence agents must be the culprit. But then again, Enon is also part of the intelligence unit, so it's not strange for him to know what happened during the meeting.

‘...Enon's deduction based solely on my tardiness is more impressive, really.’

Enon was still unaware that Yuder had confided in Kishiar about time travel. However, the way Enon looked at him, he seemed to suspect that something had changed in Yuder's relationship with Kishiar.

‘I should talk to him.’

While Enon might not relish discussing matters related to Kishiar, he was the one who had offered unconditional help, even revealing his own identity when Yuder was troubled by secrets. Yuder at least wanted to let him know that his mind felt more at ease with Kishiar after playing a strategy game together.

“Why are you looking at me like that? Are you complaining that it's too bitter?”

Unable to decipher the meaning behind Yuder’s gaze, Enon abruptly shoved a large piece of hard candy into his mouth.

“There, all set. Off you go now.”

“...Thanks, I'll enjoy it.”

The candy that Enon had forcibly given him had a dual taste of lemon and sweetness. With a bulging cheek, Yuder headed to the training room for Emperor Keilusa's final session and noticed that the expression of the chief attendant had turned somewhat peculiar. But being a seasoned palace servant, he said nothing and simply greeted Yuder. The Emperor, who had arrived earlier to warm up and experiment with his power, seemed equally composed.

Throughout the last seven hours of training, Emperor Keilusa never once complained of fatigue or irritation, completing every task splendidly. In Yuder's eyes, he was a flawless student. He accepted teachings without reservation, asked questions about things he didn't know, and endured hardships steadfastly. It was no surprise that he progressed more quickly than expected.

Thanks to this, the Emperor's abilities had improved dramatically in a short period, incomparable to when he first joined the Cavalry.

Yuder believed that, at this level, the Emperor would not face any risks from either failing to harness his powers properly or overexerting himself.

"The scheduled training ends here."

"...Phew."

As soon as Yuder's announcement concluded, the Emperor collapsed heavily into his chair, stretching himself out against its backrest.

"You've done well."

"You've worked hard, Count. But I believe you've gotten a worthy answer for your efforts."

"Indeed, I have."

Over sweat-soaked golden locks, his eyes glinted coldly, full of a deep sense of accomplishment.

"I've learned what power is, how to use it, how to achieve my goals without exceeding my limits, and what needs to be done in the future. All thanks to your guidance."

Yuder then gave the Emperor some final pieces of advice.

"As you've felt throughout the training, your power benefits from being discreet and from being used in larger amounts at once. For the transmission and movement of the medium for your power, always make use of your subordinates. Also, listening alone consumes less energy than using both eyes and ears, so keeping just your ears open will help in utilizing your power."

Emperor Keilusa could use as his eyes and ears any object that passed through his hands, regardless of the type of object. This meant that, given the right conditions, there would be nothing in the Empire that he couldn't see or hear. To use this effectively, he had to carefully conceal his power and prepare advantageous conditions.

"When you return after completing your task, I plan to maintain one or two of the most important mediums, even while sleeping. I want to show my progress to my teacher, so I'll have to work hard."

"Do so, but don't overextend yourself. As I've always said, a person with power is—"

"Stronger when they can better control their abilities and know their limits. I've memorized it now."

"Yes, that's correct."

"Don't worry. Who would give up a new life given to them so easily?"

A rare smile crept onto Emperor Keilusa's face. It was a smile that was both similar to and distinct from Kishiar's, but when he smiled like that, the resemblance between the siblings was striking.

"I see that the owner has just returned to the Dawn Palace. I would like to have dinner together, so I must leave now."

With a pleased expression, the Emperor hoisted his weary body upright. All traces of fatigue seemed to have vanished from his face as he mentioned the Empress. Yuder then realized that the Emperor had never relinquished the one medium he had connected to the Empress throughout the arduous training. A wry smile formed in Yuder's mind.

‘At this rate, you won't need anyone to teach you when I return.’

"Please convey my regards to the Commander as well. Stay well until the next time we meet."

Before Yuder left the Cavalry, Emperor Keilusa had his servants give Yuder a few luxurious balls made of fur and a plush velvet cushion. It was a small gift from the Emperor for the kitten.

"Commander, I'll be entering."

Having completed his training with the Emperor, Yuder knocked on the Commander's office door and opened it a moment later.

Kishiar was sitting not at his work desk but on a sofa. The first thing that caught Yuder's eye was his somewhat casual yet captivating attire: his coat was off, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

However, what Kishiar was doing in that relaxed attire was rather strange. In one hand, he held something glittering; in the other, something resembling a seashell. He was performing what seemed like meaningless movements with them.

"What are you doing, Commander?"

"Ah, I was examining a relic that came from Nelarn."

Only then did Yuder realize that the glittering object was the Mirror of Truth, a magic tool previously obtained from the Shuden Trading Company. It looked merely like a glint of light in Kishiar's large hand from a distance.

"Has the Count left?"

While still fiddling with both items in his hands, Kishiar casually asked.

"Yes, he wrapped things up wonderfully until the end. He left a gift for Nipollen along with his regards for you, Commander."

"What kind of gift?"

"Balls made of fur and a purple velvet cushion."

"Ah, how thoughtful of him."

Kishiar let out a smile. Yuder navigated through a pile of documents covering the floor—applications from members—and headed toward where Kishiar sat.

As he sat quietly, contemplating what Kishiar was doing, the Commander spoke first.

"I've sent the letter you gave me yesterday with the goods to be delivered to Nelarn. They said he should be able to receive it by the end of this month at the latest."

"Ah, I see."

"You wrote quite a lengthy letter; the prince will be pleased."

"Well, it was just a single page, but I included some precautions regarding his Alpha manifestation, which made the content a bit dense."

"Really? I'm curious about that. I am also an Alpha Awakener, so could you share any knowledge you may have?"

It was a naturally flowing request. Yuder then recited the same information he had written in the letter to Prince Ejain. The content wasn't anything special—just some advice on avoiding the heat period with sedatives, keeping a distance from other Awakeners that had manifested second genders, recommended incense for masking scents, and how one's scent might change depending on emotional or physical conditions.

After hearing everything, Kishiar thanked Yuder, admitting there were a few facts he hadn't known.

"Come to think of it, I remember the prince saying he felt like you already knew about his future. I didn't understand it back then, but you did know about him from the previous game, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"How was he in that previous life?"

'How was he,' indeed. While Yuder pondered how to answer, Kishiar's hands, which had been busy manipulating the seashell and the mirror, momentarily paused.

Reflecting on his memories from the previous life, Yuder slowly began to speak.

"The Silver King followed by Six Stars. Guardian of the Barrier. Ruler of the Setting Sun. These are some of the other names I remember him by."

Kishiar's red eyes blinked slowly as they absorbed Yuder's words.

"Even back then, he had become the King of Nelarn. It was a position he earned only after shedding far more blood than he does now, but he was highly regarded as a formidable ruler with an iron will."

"The Iron-Willed Ruler... feels quite different from now."

"The Nelarn he ruled was renowned as the strongest and safest place in the entire continent. Thanks to his excellent use of his abilities, no one could physically harm him, and Nelarn itself was impenetrable."

"Thanks to his defensive abilities, you mean."

"Yes."

"Quite impressive. Have you personally met him?"

"I have."

Yuder hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether it was good to share this information, but eventually decided to speak honestly.

"He didn't believe what I said, but he did try to save my life once. The man he is now is not the man he was then, but I did give him some advice in the West, and I did want to repay that debt."

"Your life?"

Kishiar's eyes seemed to shift slightly. Was it Yuder's imagination? After blinking once, those red irises met Yuder's gaze again, looking no different than usual.

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"Your life?"

Kishiar's eyes seemed to shift slightly. Was it Yuder's imagination? After blinking once, those red irises met Yuder's gaze again, looking no different than usual.

"Were there many moments when your life was in danger? Or is it... the time I'm thinking of?"

It was clear what Kishiar meant by 'that time.' It had to be the last day of Yuder's life that he had seen in his dream.

Although framed as a question, Kishiar seemed fairly certain about what the answer would be. Yuder responded with a face as impassive as possible.

"It's the time you're thinking of. There haven't been many occasions when someone in another country would try to save my life."

"Not many, you say."

Kishiar repeated Yuder's last words as if muttering to himself. His expression remained unchanged, but something about the eyes shadowed by golden lashes seemed to darken. Yuder quickly added another comment.

"To clarify, aside from that one time, I've never received such an offer. I hope you don't misunderstand that this happens often."

"Ah... I see."

Kishiar finally gave a small smile.

"It's clear that Prince Ejain possesses exceptional judgment in recognizing talent. With that in mind, it doesn't seem strange for you to want to repay the debt. I understand completely."

However, even after his words were done, Kishiar's hands, holding the magic artifact and relic, remained stretched out, unmoving.

"Is there anything else you're curious about?"

"It's not that I'm curious, but... No, never mind."

Uncharacteristically for a man who could skillfully find out anything, Kishiar hesitated and backed off.

"It makes me uneasy when you say that. Please, just say what's on your mind."

"Anything, you say? Truly?"

"Yes."

"..."

No reply came. Instead, Kishiar's eyes squinted slightly in the silence. As Yuder wondered if he had said something wrong, Kishiar reached out and gently touched his cheek.

"Hmm... Saying 'anything is fine' seems to be too risky. You'd best avoid being so careless."

"Why is it careless to say I can answer any question you have?"

"That's what I mean."

Kishiar responded with a faint, bitter smile.

"If I take your words to mean 'anything,' who knows what I might end up doing."

"That's a strange thing to say."

Of all things, "not knowing one's limits" hardly suited Kishiar. Wondering if he was trying to divert the conversation because he didn't want to talk, Yuder spoke again.

"Let's change the topic then."

"Hmm?"

"I'd like to know what you're thinking. Is it alright to ask that?"

At that, Kishiar blinked a couple of times before bursting into laughter. His laughter didn't die down for quite some time in front of Yuder, who frowned slightly.

"Ah... I doubt there's anyone better than you, my assistant, at extracting confessions."

"Why do you laugh as you say that?"

"It's a surrender. I'll tell you."

Raising both hands, Kishiar signaled his surrender, and the smile around his eyes deepened.

"My thoughts are simple. Firstly, I was thinking how nice it would be if you were sitting beside me instead of across from me..."

Without another word, Yuder immediately rose and moved to sit next to Kishiar.

"Yes. And what else were you thinking?"

The smile finally vanished from the gaze that felt ever closer, ever deeper.

With a small sigh, the man who had lost his playful demeanor lowered his eyes.

"I thought I wanted to hold you."

Was that all he intended to say?

Or was there another question lurking?

It was uncertain, but for some reason, it felt like even if asked further, he wouldn't reveal more.

Staring at Kishiar's idle hands, Yuder remained silent for a moment. Despite saying he wanted to hold him, Kishiar made no move to do so. Finally, Yuder gently raised his hand.

As soon as his black-gloved fingers touched Kishiar's shoulder, something dropped with a soft clatter. Turning his gaze, he found it was an old hand mirror and a seashell.

'Those precious things.'

Before he could even open his mouth, the man whose hands were now free pulled Yuder into an embrace tighter than ever before.

Feeling the slight pressure on the nape of his neck and the tickle of hair against his skin, all other thoughts seemed to vanish from his mind. Yuder exhaled deeply and leaned his own head against Kishiar. Despite being just a hug, it felt as if all the tension and fatigue that had built up throughout the day washed away.

'It's not because the medicine Enon gave me is finally kicking in...'

Rather, it was because deep down, he had been yearning for this moment while they talked.

Yuder caressed Kishiar's cheek, lifted his head, and their lips met. After a lingering kiss, what he smelled was his own scent—undeniably intense. It felt so apparent even to himself that he realized his heat period wasn't far off.

'I wish it would come before we leave the capital... But who knows.'

Just then, as Kishiar welcomed Yuder's scent and further entwined their tongues, he collapsed entirely onto the sofa, interrupting his thoughts.

"Haah..."

Though it was the case yesterday as well, every time Kishiar sensed the scent that increasingly slipped from Yuder's control, he seemed reluctant to let him go. When he himself smelled it, it was merely a mild scent, but to an Alpha, it may have felt differently.

Yuder felt the scent of Kishiar, who had also been quite forthright with his own scent.

The sharp, flaming desire he sensed was so vivid. Amidst the unhesitant touches, nothing else seemed to matter.

...

Days passed in a flurry of tasks, and finally, the day arrived when they would set out to directly participate in the second round of recruiting members for the Cavalry.

The party consisted only of Kishiar, Yuder, and Nathan Zuckerman. Though their departure appeared humble, with only three horses instead of a carriage, to those who knew of their individual strengths and abilities, the scene didn't seem modest at all.

"Yuder, take care on your journey!"

"If any issues arise, call for me at any time. I'll come running."

Choosing to leave at dawn to avoid attracting attention, those who came to see them off were limited to the three Deputy Commanders and Alik Pelgin, the disciple of Thais Yulman. Amid the early morning gloom, Alik, shivering in the cold, sniveled as he handed something to Yuder.

"Eheh, t-take this. It's medicine improved by both my master and the pharmacist of the Cavalry, as well as a prototype of an Awakener control device that I've tried making. Eheh."

"You seem like you have a cold. Wouldn't it have been better for you to stay with your master?"

At Kishiar's teasing question, Alik gave a bitter smile.

"My master loves his morning sleep, you see. And he stayed up all night making medicine because of me, so what can be done about his fatigue?"

His shoulders, disciplined like those of a well-trained slave, seemed a bit lonely.

Yuder opened the cloth bag that Alik had given him and sneakily inspected the medicine and control device.

'I saw the first prototype once... It was better than I expected.'

The heat period stabilizer for Awakeners who had manifested second genders, was a white tablet. It was developed by augmenting the medicine that Thais Yulman had already created. The first prototype had been tested on an Alpha Awakener who was experiencing a heat period and had consented. Remarkably, the overpowering scent and abnormal arousal almost disappeared within a day of taking the medication.

The heat period itself took several more days to completely end, but the dramatic improvement of symptoms alone was an incredible feat. So, Thais Yulman had recently embarked on research for mass production of the second-generation prototype, and Yuder had asked for some samples in advance.

'You never know what might happen.'

While the master was busy making medicine, Alik focused on researching the control device. His first prototype was a modified version of the necklace-type control device traditionally used by mages. At a glance, it looked like an ordinary accessory, a far more moderate and beautiful design compared to control devices from his past life, which resembled spiked shackles or dog collars.

The first prototype, built on the principles of control devices for mages, halved Alik's power. Of course, it had no effect on Yuder, but Yuder thought it would be useful enough to ask for a few more before they left.

The intended users would not be him, but others they might encounter in the future.

"I did put in three more control devices since you asked... Next time, when I make the second prototype, I'll make sure it's more refined," Alik said, his eyes still filled with disappointment that the control devices had no effect on Yuder.

"I promise to make something that will work on Yuder as well."

"It looks like we can depart now."

Nathan Zuckerman, who had just finished inspecting the horses, reported to Kishiar. All the luggage was already well-secured on the horses.

Yuder mounted his horse and glanced at Kanna, Ever, and Steiber. They each waved, their faces full of resolve.

They didn't leave the front of the Cavalry Headquarters until the three horses had disappeared from sight.

"Our first destination is Hartan, right?"

"Yes."

The Eastern region, where a second batch of Cavalry recruitment was held and where a branch was simultaneously being established, was a place Yuder had already visited. The small village, which was the hometown of Devran and where Yuder first encountered Nahan, was conveniently located despite its underdevelopment.

It wasn't far from Odequia, the central city and stronghold of the Diarca Family. There were also many fairly developed cities nearby. The reason the area hadn't developed despite its favorable location was the rugged mountains and bandits. However, since the last incident, the bandits had disappeared, creating an opportunity for development. They heard that Zachlis Hartan, who went from being a provisional lord to a new lord, was taking advantage of the opportunity and putting a lot of effort into road construction.

It was a region where the lord was highly favorable toward the Cavalry and was well-located. It had plenty of space for buildings and significant potential for development.

It couldn't have been better. The establishment of the Eastern branch was progressing faster than in any other region, except for the West, primarily because the Zachlis faction had readily agreed when asked in advance about the branch's formation.

"How do you feel about going back?"

"I am a bit curious to see how much it has changed."

The group moved smoothly, with no one struggling, making their journey remarkably fast. They arrived in Hartan earlier than expected, and what greeted them was a throng of people far more bustling than before.

"This is the place for recruiting Cavalry members, right?"

"Look over there. They've already started building the branch building!"

The once serene village, abundant with fields, now had a substantial inn and a fair number of respectable shops. The guards who were maintaining the roads throughout the town no longer had the same unfriendliness and laziness; their faces were taut with discipline.

Yuder stopped one of the guards and requested to be guided to where the lord was. The guard didn't recognize the three individuals dressed in dark robes, but he instantly recognized the button Yuder extended, which was engraved with the Cavalry's emblem.

"Welcome!"

Like a bolt of lightning, Zachlis Hartan rushed out from the castle where the lord resided, greeting them with a composed face.

"It's an honor to see you again. The first dispatched members from the Cavalry are also staying in the castle, so you'll be able to see them if you come with me. Please, follow me."

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Upon following Zachlis, Hartan's small fortress already had a few people who had emerged to greet them.

"Welcome!"

No sooner had Dermilla, Zachlis' fiancée and Devran's only sister, greeted them with a bright smile than the men and women in familiar Cavalry uniforms burst into cheers.

"At last, the Commander has arrived!"

"Yuder!"

Among the throng, Yuder spotted young Jimmy, who was waving his hand excitedly. Yuder raised his hand to wave back.

Originally from the East, where his parents also lived, Jimmy had applied and had been impressively selected in this round of recruitment. Despite his young age, he was chosen due to his connection to the area and his unquestionable abilities. Although there were some who had their reservations, the reports thus far had shown no issues. Judging by his expression, it seemed he was doing very well.

'Strangely enough, he seems to have grown a bit taller since I last saw him.'

"Yep, I've grown taller! Can you see that my pants are shorter?"

Ah, indeed. Yuder pointed to the hem of his trousers and lightly tousled Jimmy's hair before being swallowed up in the chatter of his troops. Even though they had been sending reports daily, they had so much to catch up on that it took quite some time before Yuder could finally unload his luggage in his room.

The room prepared for Kishiar was originally used by the castle's lord, while Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder were each given rooms next to it. Zachlis, who had surrendered his own room, seemed quite cheerful at the idea of using his wife's room on another floor. Apparently, he was happy for the chance to be closer to Dermilla, who had originally occupied the room.

"Um, Mr. Cavalry Commander's assistant... is my brother doing well? We often exchange letters, but it's different when he's far away. I can't help but worry."

After unpacking all his belongings, Yuder was cautiously approached by Dermilla. Considering her much-improved complexion compared to the last time he saw her at the trial of the Apeto family, there seemed to be no doubt that she was doing well with Zachlis.

"Yes, Devran is doing well. Actually, he asked me to deliver a gift and a letter to you when I get to the East. Here it is."

Yuder handed over a small envelope that he had previously received from Devran. Inside it was a slender, elegant silver necklace, along with a letter, all packaged in a thin silk pouch. Taking it out, Dermilla looked flustered and scratched her head.

"Oh, my brother! Asking busy people to do such things... I'm sorry. I'll tell him to send the gifts directly next time."

"No need to apologize. Devran has been a helpful colleague to me; delivering this is the least I can do. Rather than apologies, I would like to convey more of your gratitude to him."

His reply was so straightforward that it was devoid of any discernible emotion. However, this made Dermilla feel more relieved. She smiled shyly and muttered softly, putting her heart into her words.

"Thank you. Truly."

Yuder then asked her how her father was doing and what life was like back in Hartan since their return.

"My father is doing well. He has gotten much better since he's been living in a warmer place. Ever since the news arrived that the Cavalry did great service in the West, even the other members of Zachlis' family and relatives have stopped opposing our relationship. People who behaved poorly towards us in the past have either apologized or act as if nothing happened, so life is good now."

In the castle, Dermilla was recognized not merely as the fiancée but practically as Lady Zachlis by the castle staff and the local populace. She had taken up all the responsibilities that would traditionally fall upon the Lord's wife. While she initially struggled with these unfamiliar duties, her innate intelligence and wit quickly saw her through, allowing her to adapt.

Furthermore, now that Zachlis's brother, Zakail, who had kidnapped her, had been fully subdued and punished, and her own brother Devran had received a surname, which was given to all members of the Cavalry, her social standing was no longer an issue.

Dermilla declared that she couldn't be happier at the moment, free to be with Zachlis and surrounded by happiness. Her face bore no sign of deceit.

"I'm glad to hear that," Yuder said. "But if you ever face difficulties in the future, don't hesitate to reach out to either Devran or me."

"Just hearing you say that is comforting. Thank you."

"You'll be responsible for an important part of the newly-forming eastern branch of the Cavalry. It's only natural to offer support."

Despite his serious tone, Dermilla somehow felt that Yuder's words were partly intended to alleviate tension, almost like a light-hearted jest.

'Well, it's better if there's no need to contact him for serious matters,' she thought.

"Yuder," called out Kishiar, appearing from an adjacent room as if he had just finished unpacking. Yuder excused himself from Dermilla and followed Kishiar.

The two immediately set about inspecting the construction site for the Cavalry's eastern branch and reviewed the ongoing work. They even discreetly observed the first round of tests taking place for new recruits. Most of the candidates were unfamiliar to Yuder, but a few displayed impressive abilities.

Kishiar watched the ongoing tests from a distance, glancing down at the paper in his hand. Thanks to his magic bracelet that altered his appearance, very few people knew who he was.

"So far, 284 people have passed the first round of the test... quite a number," he commented.

"I don't think our standards are unreasonably high, but there have been more exceptional individuals than anticipated," Yuder replied.

Juan Larevo, who was officially leading the eastern first detachment, responded with great enthusiasm. A past roommate of Yuder, Juan belonged to the Shin Division.

"The second round of tests starts tomorrow."

"Yes, that's correct!"

"From then on, both my assistant and I will join the evaluation."

"Understood. We'll prepare the area for you."

Juan had the ability to move incredibly fast for brief moments. Those who saw him use this power during the recruitment tests could not help but marvel at his skills.

"Look at that! How is he moving so quickly and yet still managing to do everything accurately? How is he controlling his power like that?"

"Is he trying to scare us off with that display? Showing us the level we have to reach to become a Cavalry member?"

His remarkable performance—supervising the recruitment tests, instantly assisting his comrades, and then in the blink of an eye, returning to Yuder and Kishiar—was undoubtedly the result of rigorous training within the Cavalry.

After completing their rounds, Yuder and Kishiar returned to Hartan Castle. Zachlis, who was busy giving orders to the servants, rushed over, curious about their observations.

"How were the places you've visited?"

"Everything is progressing in an orderly manner," Yuder reported. "The road construction centering around the village is also going smoothly. Just keep going as you are."

And so, it seemed that all was well in the realms of responsibility for each.

"It's all thanks to the Duke's help," Zachlis remarked.

"Help?"

He was aware that roadwork was ongoing in the village under Zachlis' supervision, but had Kishiar ever had a role in that? Baffled by the new information, he blinked, just as Kishiar timely spoke up.

"What I did hardly qualifies as help. I merely responded to a letter from a young knight who unexpectedly found himself a lord, detailing his difficulties."

"That's not true. If it weren't for your assistance, Duke, we wouldn't have been able to make this much progress so quickly. You sent engineers from the capital to teach us the optimal road routes and construction methods utilizing Hartan's geography. You even coached us on how to deal with stubborn bureaucrats."

Listening to the conversation, it became clear that Kishiar had consistently corresponded with Zachlis since they first connected over the Apeto case, offering thoughtful responses to his concerns.

Zachlis, who had always intended to live his life as a knight, found himself faced with daunting challenges after inheriting the title of lord and siding with the Imperial faction. These ranged from dealing with regional resistance to addressing the village's decline. It wasn't his administrative talent, of which he had none, that had gotten him this far. It was Kishiar's guidance and his own strong desire to live happily with Dermila.

'...So, he has been helping with Hartan's development all this while?'

Enhancing and protecting Hartan, now part of the Imperial faction, was a long-term benefit. Yet, he hadn't expected Kishiar to have been so diligently attentive to them.

Yuder sighed deeply, feeling a strong beat in his chest, surprised by Kishiar's unwavering commitment, even though he was already aware of Kishiar's reputation for feeling like he lived each day as if it were three.

"No need to thank me as if it were a big deal," Kishiar waved it off.

"I know you always say that, but since I've met you in person again, I really wanted to express my gratitude. Rest assured, I'll take good care of you while you're in the East."

Zachlis said this with a smile. Although he still looked more like a knight than a lord, he seemed much more reliable than before.

"So, when have you been looking after the East?" Yuder asked.

"I wouldn't say 'looking after.' I've just been responding. I haven't done anything particularly noteworthy."

A wry smile crept onto Kishiar's face at Yuder's comment as they entered the Lord's conference room.

"Anyway, did anyone catch your eye during the first round of tests?"

"Well, I didn't see anyone particularly noteworthy during my brief look. But the documents might reveal something."

The reason Yuder had to come for the second round of recruitment was precisely this. Based on future knowledge, he intended to filter in or out individuals who would be either helpful or detrimental to the Cavalry.

'No matter how carefully the other units have screened, there will be spies deliberately planted somewhere. On the other hand, there will also be capable people who failed to join the Cavalry and diverted elsewhere...'

Yuder glanced at the piles of documents filling the room. Though significantly fewer than in the capital, the volume was still considerable.

However, the thought of backing down didn't even cross his mind. As he picked up a stack of documents, Kishiar too grabbed a pile and placed it in front of him.

"Looks like we're diving right into work again. I should tell Nathan to bring us something tasty."

"I've already brought some."

Before he could say there was no need, the door opened, and Nathan Zuckerman appeared, carrying a tray. He had disappeared right after unloading the luggage, so Yuder had wondered where he had gone. Clearly, the man had been busy in his own right.

"As expected, you're an excellent adjutant, Nathan."

"Your Grace seems happier when I bring you tea and pastries than when I wield a sword."

"That's only natural. A sword isn't of much use in everyday life."

"..."

Yuder cast a grateful glance at Nathan, then began to rapidly shuffle through the papers in front of him.

After pulling an all-nighter, Yuder finally managed to sort through dozens of promising applications.

This feat was achieved after Nathan Zuckerman had delivered sixteen trays of snacks and twenty-three cups of tea.

"Are you done?"

Kishiar, who had finished reviewing the papers before Yuder, gently asked as their eyes met. Yuder ran his fingers through his slightly disheveled hair and took a deep breath.

"Yes. Those on the right are either long-standing members of the Cavalry or individuals with notable abilities. Those on the left are people we should keep a close eye on. Even if they fail, we need to monitor their movements continuously."

People can change dramatically depending on circumstances. However, some stay on the same path no matter how much their circumstances change.

It wasn't easy to categorize people solely based on memories of their past and future actions. But Yuder took some comfort in knowing that this time, Kishiar's judgement would also be at play.

Even if Yuder made a wrong call, Kishiar would be there to back him up. This allowed them to assess people without bias influenced by information.

"You've worked hard. How about catching some sleep before the second round of tests this afternoon?"

Kishiar massaged the back of Yuder's neck as he suggested this. Yuder started to shake his head, but as Kishiar's hands touched him, a wave of exhaustion swept over him, causing him to hesitantly nod.

"Alright. But, Commander, you should rest as well."

"Of course, I should."

With a face that betrayed no fatigue, the man smiled.

Adjoined to the meeting room was a spacious bedroom, designed for those who needed to rest while working. Yuder lay down next to Kishiar, closed his eyes, and fell asleep before he could even exhale.

However, when he awoke, it was to a chilling cold.

'...What is this?'

For a moment after waking, he couldn't quite grasp the situation, his mind still foggy.

After blinking a few times, he remembered why he was there and what he had been doing before he fell asleep. Instinctively, he turned his head to check the spot next to him; it was empty.

'...Where is Kishiar?'

Chapter 600

'...Kishiar is...'

Yuder rose from his seat and went outside.

Unlike the dimly lit makeshift bedroom, the sun still shone through the large window of the conference room. This meant he hadn't been asleep for long.

Kishiar was also there, engrossed in something.

It certainly wasn't the mountain of paperwork piled up. Yuder moved a bit closer to discover that Kishiar was focused on an old strategy board game. He wasn't playing alone; all the game pieces

were set on the hexagonal board as if ready for play. Kishiar's gaze seemed lost in some profound thought.

"...Commander?"

"Hm?"

Kishiar finally turned his head. How deeply must he have been lost in thought to not even notice the presence of someone who would usually catch his attention even from a distance?

Yuder carefully concealed his rising curiosity and shifted his gaze to the strategy board game Kishiar had been observing.

"What were you doing?"

"Hm... I woke up not too tired and had nothing to do, so I was exploring around here when I found this," Kishiar said, gesturing to the worn-out board with a smile.

"It reminded me of the beginner set I first used when I learned to play strategy games. It's likely that the same craftsman made both; mine was made in an eastern workshop as well. It was lost before I moved to Peletta, so seeing this brought back memories."

The beginner set wasn't vastly different from what he'd used before. The pieces were just smaller, lighter, and more colorful. Though the vibrant colors on this particular board had faded with time, Yuder's gaze was inexplicably drawn to it just knowing that it resembled what Kishiar had used in his youth.

"Would you like to ask Zachlis to give it to you? It seems to be unused; he might not mind parting with it."

"No, that won't be necessary. It's not something I need right now," Kishiar mumbled as he fiddled with one of the game pieces.

"It just reminded me of when I first learned to play."

When Kishiar first learned to play strategy games, it must have been when he was very young.

Yuder wondered how old he might have been. Was he so young that even holding those small pieces was a challenge? Or perhaps...

A portrait of young Kishiar in the Imperial Palace fleetingly came to Yuder's mind. Perhaps because he'd seen the real-life image, he could easily imagine the boy with angelic golden locks sitting in front of a strategy board game.

'I was quite frustrated when I had to learn such things,' Yuder thought.

But Kishiar was likely different, enjoying the challenge because that was his nature.

As Yuder vaguely imagined this, the chill he felt when he woke up dissipated, replaced by a warm feeling filling his heart. Yuder's eyes softened, prompting Kishiar to rise from his seat and cover the board game.

"Well, Juan will be here soon. Shall we go and observe the second test?"

He naturally picked up the coat that Yuder had laid aside. Despite Yuder's protests that it was unnecessary, Kishiar skillfully helped him put it on. Then, as if asking for a token of gratitude, he planted a kiss near Yuder's temple. He was the same playful Kishiar as always; nothing seemed different at all.

What was the issue with him simply wanting to enjoy a strategy game, reminiscent of the old days? Especially when he was about to go through his first proper heat period, which was affecting his behavior in subtle ways. That should be the bigger concern here.

Yuder thought that far before leaving the meeting room with Kishiar.

...

...But maybe he shouldn't have.

"As expected of Yuder Aile... As soon as you step in, the applicants' true abilities are revealed and their real intentions are exposed. How fortunate it was that it wasn't me."

"Wait, how did you even catch that guy who was trying to cheat by secretly hiring another Awakener to take the test? You all saw it, right? Everyone was surprised, except for the Commander."

"Oh, we saw it. Had a hard time managing my expression, pretending like I knew what was going on, just like the Commander."

"Don't you guys know? I heard Yuder used to be a mercenary before he joined our group. That's why he can see through most deceptions."

"Really?"

"No way. I heard he was a disciple taught the art of the sword by a master swordsman who hid his true identity."

"What are you talking about? Wasn't he the disciple of a mad mage living in some mountain valley? And isn't that mage related to the bearded mage currently at the Cavalry headquarters?"

'I'm sorry, but none of that is true.'

Yuder looked at the Cavalry members animatedly discussing him and wondered when they would finally stop gossiping.

"Is it... is it true? Is Yuder really like that?"

'...If I let this go on, Jimmy will probably believe everything they're saying.'

"Enough, all of you. Wasn't there enough training this morning?"

As Yuder approached them quietly and spoke, all the members shuddered. Faces turned to him with forced smiles.

"Huh, Yuder! What do you mean, not enough training this morning?"

"It feels like everyone's stamina has improved since we came to the East, but our training hasn't caught up. Feels like we have too much leftover energy."

"What are you talking about? Can't you see we can barely move? Only Jimmy and you are up and walking!"

"That's right! How can you say such nonsense? We're already pushing our limits just by not skipping training while working!"

"Well, if you don't like it, then don't do it. The capital side has already increased their training level."

Training may be torturous, but lagging behind others is even more unbearable.

Years of indoctrination and training had conditioned the members to react incredibly fast to such competitiveness.

"What? The capital side already elevated their training level?"

"Then it's a different story. Tell us, too!"

"We can't afford to be inferior to those in the capital next time we meet!"

He knew they would react like that. Such naiveté.

Yuder handed Jimmy a new training schedule that their counterparts in the capital were probably grinding through as they spoke. Jimmy's eyes lit up as he quickly read through it.

"Wow! This is amazing! They've added twice the amount of strength and flexibility training to the basic regimen, and also specialized advanced training based on individual skills! I'll practice swinging my sword with a rock attached to it without dropping it while repeating the training manual! This is exciting!"

The training requirements had gotten significantly more difficult, and while Jimmy was excited like a puppy, the faces of the rest of the members turned a shade of green.

"Wh...what is this? Is this really meant for humans to do? It's not like something out of an exaggerated knight novel, is it?"

"Yuder, don't lie! How could those guys in the capital possibly do this?"

"You told me you couldn't do it before, but now you can do everything."

"Well...! Yes, but! Darn it! Even so!"

"Enough whining. Don't forget the list I gave you yesterday, and train as diligently as always."

"Uh... Wait, where are you going?"

It was then that the members finally sensed the unusual atmosphere surrounding Yuder and awkwardly looked around. Yuder was already fully prepared to leave, dressed even in the robe he'd worn when he first arrived at Hartan.

"That's right, I'm leaving. My work in the East is done."

"What? What about the Commander?"

"He said to understand that he has to leave quietly due to the situation. I came here just to deliver the training schedule."

"No way, this soon..."

Though they couldn't hide their surprise, the members soon nodded in agreement. Jimmy, unable to conceal his disappointment, stood and tightly hugged Yuder.

"I wanted to spar with you a bit more! My parents are planning to move their business base to Hartan, so they wanted to meet you if possible..."

"We can meet next time."

"Alright... I'm going back to the capital anyway... Uh, but, brother."

While hugging Yuder, Jimmy suddenly lifted his head as if sensing something. A confused boy, rubbing his head against Yuder's chest, whispered softly into Yuder's ear.

"I smell something from you. Are you not feeling well?"

"..."

It seemed the scent had intensified, not just in moments of heightened emotion, but in general. Yuder immediately masked the scent and frowned.

"It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

"It's not nothing... I'm pretty sure it's something..."

Even though he was still young, Jimmy seemed to be an Alpha who had remarkably keen scent detection. It was incredibly strange to have someone detect his scent, but Yuder supposed it was something he'd have to get used to. Confused by Jimmy's abrupt behavior, the other members watched as Yuder calmly bid them farewell.

"Then, I'm leaving. Report any problems, and I'll see you later."

"Uh, yeah. Take care!"

"There might not be any great monsters or bandits to ambush you on your journey... but still, be careful!"

As Yuder moved away from them toward the back gate of Hartan Castle, he saw Kishiar, Nathan Zuckerman, Zachlis, and Dermila already mounted on their horses.

"Did you say your goodbyes?"

"Yes."

Kishiar smiled.

"It's regrettable to send you off so quietly... But time is of the essence. We've included some rations and items useful for night travel in your baggage. Please accept them."

Zachlis and Dermila had sent the servants away, insisting on bidding him farewell personally. Yuder accepted the small package from Dermila without hesitation and briefly conveyed his thanks.

"Thank you."

"May you remain healthy until we meet again!"

The task of recruiting members in the East, which had posed no great challenges, was swiftly concluded.

Their next destination was the West.

...

"Greetings, Commander! I am now the official Western Branch Leader, not just an interim one—Emun Philang!"

The West was already an established branch, requiring less attention than the East. The familiar faces in the West greeted them warmly and treated them with as much care as Zachlis had.

They had assessed the situation of the Western pioneers, who gathered in numbers second only to the capital. They heard stories of the Awakeners, previously affiliated with the Star of Nagran, who had been remarkably silent in their activities in the West. Time had flown as they met with Marty and Robel, and heard about the cleanup from previous incidents.

And so it was that Yuder, who had gone to sleep in the modest mansion of Baron Koelt, the new lord of Tainu, abruptly woke up. His eyes shot open, gripped by an unidentifiable cold sensation that seemed to come out of nowhere.

'...'

What could it have been? He tried to grasp the sensation, rubbing his head, but it remained elusive.

Hesitant, he stepped out of his room, only to find that Kishiar's room light was on, despite the late hour.

"...Commander."

He knocked on the door, and soon after, a man appeared, clad in nightclothes and sporting a smile.

"Hmm? What brings you here at this hour? Can't sleep?"

"Why aren't you sleeping, Commander?"

"It's customary to have a drink on such a moonlit night."

Yuder sensed the jest, though he didn't fully understand the comment. His gaze shifted beyond Kishiar's shoulder to the table behind him, where a bottle and glass were set. Apparently, Kishiar really had been drinking alone.

'...Wait a minute.'

"Have you also been playing a strategy game by yourself?"

Yuder's eyes narrowed as he spotted a strategy board game next to the glass. At his question, Kishiar turned his head and glanced behind him.

"Well, it helps me sort out my thoughts when I have nothing to do? Baron Koelt seems to love these games; he has one in every room. Isn't there one in your room as well?"

That was true. Yuder recalled hearing that during dinner, and he remembered that indeed, there was a game board among the amenities for guests in a corner of his room.

Yuder had no particular interest in it; he had merely given it a glance and moved on. But it wasn't strange that the man before him felt differently.

Still, something felt odd.

'...Something feels off.'

Seeing Yuder simply gaze at him, a slightly puzzled smile crept onto Kishiar's face.

"Thought I might have been up to something else?"

"...You seem to be sleeping too little."

"Your concern always warms my heart in a way nothing else can, but look at me. Does this look like the face of someone who's sleep-deprived?"

He had a point. Thanks to his drinking, Kishiar's complexion was even better than usual. He looked like a tempter who had the night at his fingertips. Unlike times when he'd lost sleep before, his skin didn't lack luster nor did shadows linger under his eyes.

However, the unsettling feeling did not dissipate. Why was that?

"Hmm... perhaps as the time approaches, your senses are becoming more acute. It happens. I've experienced a few heat periods since my Awakening, and they were not always pleasant."

Kishiar, who had been scrutinizing Yuder's face, sighed softly, opened the door wider, and gracefully gestured for him to come in.

"Come in, the hallway is too cold to stand barefoot. Would you like to join me for a drink?"

Drinking would have no effect on Yuder, but he thought that spending time together might clarify this strange mood. So, he accepted the invitation.

Yet, as soon as they entered, Kishiar naturally began to put away the strategy board. Throughout their late-night conversation, there were no peculiar comments.

Kishiar kept Yuder entertained with all kinds of amusing stories, even managing to coax a faint smile out of him. He seemed pleased with himself for doing so.

Yes, he seemed pleased. At least, that's how it appeared.