

Turning 601

Chapter 601

‘Something's off... it's bothering me.’

Yuder Aile generally trusted his instincts when he felt something was amiss.

While often indifferent, he possessed a keen sense in specific areas, almost like an animal's instinct. This was especially true when it came to recognizing imminent dangers, gauging an opponent's strength, or discerning the growth potential of those around him who should be nurtured.

However, Yuder, who was usually swift to act based on these instincts, found it hard to rely on them when it came to Kishiar La Orr.

And for good reason—the instincts that alarmed him this time were triggered merely by a strange chill he felt when waking up a few times and noticing that Kishiar had been playing strategy games more frequently than before. Other than that, there seemed to be no reason for concern, leaving no room for doubt.

The chill that startled him awake could simply be due to Yuder's body entering a certain biological phase. As for the strategy games, Kishiar had recently played a memorable match, so it wasn't entirely strange that he was more focused on them.

Yet, despite all rational explanations, an inexplicable feeling gnawed at Yuder's senses whenever he tried to dismiss it. That was the problem.

Something was nagging at him, and he couldn't figure out what it was.

‘Logically speaking, there shouldn't be any issues. But what if there's a possibility, however slim, that I'm missing something?’

He would rather be overly sensitive than negligent. The chances of there being no problem were 99%, but Yuder was troubled by that remaining 1%. It was inevitable because the person involved was Kishiar.

Yuder didn't want to overlook even a moment's strangeness, not because he remembered Kishiar's unexplained disappearance in his past life.

‘Quite the opposite, actually.’

The more Yuder knew about Kishiar, the more a minor oddity would raise his hackles. It was genuinely strange.

‘I still can't pinpoint what exactly feels off. So, the only thing I can do now is...’

He continued to observe Kishiar, scanning the surroundings. Others in the vicinity were also included in this scrutiny.

"Hmm? Something different about the Duke—or should I say, Commander? I honestly can't tell."

Marty, who had come for a private meeting with Yuder to discuss business, tilted her head in confusion.

"I've always heard you're a bit unusual... so I can't really say if anything's changed since the last time I saw you. Oh! Did you perhaps get a haircut?"

Robel, who stood beside her, chimed in, subtly rolling his eyes. Although he couched his words, they seemed to suggest that it was difficult to discern any strangeness now when the individual was already known to be peculiar.

"No, never mind. Let's get back to the matter at hand."

"Ah, yes."

Robel quickly handed Yuder a letter he had been holding. It was a letter sent just yesterday by one of Robel's colleagues stationed at a key location in the south, at the base of the Star of Nagran.

"Out of those at the southern base, a total of 23 have expressed a clear desire to apply for the new unit and branch staff positions. Most of them are people who have stayed at the western base. As of

the time this letter was sent, some have already made plans to leave the base in groups. They will head to the nearest southern city to apply."

"Wouldn't it be risky if they get caught?"

"Well, it's possible, but I've heard that lately the atmosphere among them hasn't been good. Some people are even leaving the base. It seems they're just going through the motions."

How bad could it be? Yuder quickly skimmed through the letter Robel had handed him, finding the answer almost immediately.

"- The mood is sour because Sera hasn't received a response to her letter to the sage for a long time. After a lengthy meeting, they sent another, but in the meantime, a few more have left, saying they might start a fight. I've been doing as you suggested, poking at the nervous ones to see if they're thinking of leaving. Meanwhile, many of those who followed Nahan have become friendly with Southern merchants..."

Yuder would bet money that the unanswered letter to the sage was the one intercepted by the Eldore siblings and Gakane, which had spurred their burglaries.

'It seems that because we intercepted the letter, the information about the Southern merchants hasn't properly reached the sage's side yet.'

Taking advantage of the confusion among them, Robel had played his role well. Yuder readily offered him praise.

"Good work. We welcome any support for those who just want to live ordinary lives. Please continue."

"Yes, of course."

According to Robel, he hadn't been able to find out the exact locations of the Southern base and other bases due to his former colleagues' extreme caution.

"The Southern base's location has changed since my time there. It's now in a desert, and they're using powers to hide the entrance, which changes often. This letter went through several channels just to reach here, so anything more would be..."

"It's better not to ask questions that might raise suspicion. Knowing how many people are thinking of leaving is more important than their exact location, so don't push yourself."

"Yes."

Yuder scanned Robel's smiling face. Even Robel, so diligent and well-disposed toward the Cavalry, still had no idea what the 'sage's ability' was.

That was separate from his faith in the Cavalry; he frequently interacted with other Awakeners who had yet to break free from the sage's indoctrination.

'That damned brainwashing ability.'

Simplistic, but for that reason, powerful and persistent. Nevertheless, Yuder wasn't anxious; he knew that with time, they would find a way to break it.

'Kishiar is more of a concern at the moment.'

From the perspective of people like Marty and Robel, Kishiar seemed no different from before. The next target should be someone who knew him well.

Just as Yuder was contemplating this, he raised his eyes to find the two people still there, seemingly having said all they had to say.

"Is there anything else you'd like to discuss?"

"No, it's just... actually, I had a favor to ask you for the next time we meet. It seemed like a good time now..."

A favor? Any simple favor could be handled by other members in the Western branch. What could this favor be that he had to wait to meet him again to ask?

Yuder nodded, giving Robel permission to speak. Robel's face flushed.

"Uh... I heard that the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry is responsible for planning and supervising all training within the Cavalry. Is that correct?"

'Ah, so that's it.'

"Yes, more or less."

"Strictly speaking, we may not be considered members, but we're still working for the Cavalry at the branch, right? I was wondering if there's a way to get separate training for the abilities we possess, so they could be put to better use in the future."

"If you're looking for systematic training, wouldn't it be better to join as a member of the second round of recruitment this time?"

"No, I don't want to be a member. I'm not particularly proud of my powers."

Marty frowned visibly at her response.

"However, I've heard from many members who were able to develop their abilities in unexpected ways and found it easier to control their powers after receiving training from the Commander's assistants. I understand when they say that not using my power isn't the only answer for me. If I could have that opportunity, I would like to give it a try."

For someone who had said she wanted to get rid of her awakened abilities due to nearly being killed by betrayal from other Awakeners, this was a quite a radical statement.

Realizing that her time in the Western Branch had been good for her in some way made Yuder feel better. He thought, 'Whatever the reason, it always comes down to Kishiar, doesn't it?'

Yuder let out a small sigh and nodded.

"Exactly, not using an awakened ability isn't the answer to everything. An uncontrollable ability can activate unintentionally and cause confusion."

"You're right. My ability is particularly like that, and I want to correct it."

Marty's ability was to temporarily steal the energy from those she touched. Thinking of Robel, the person who would be in contact with her most often, it wasn't hard to guess why she was motivated this way.

"Understood. While it's not to the level of the members, I can teach you a few useful training techniques. And..."

As he was speaking, an item that could be helpful in this situation popped into Yuder's mind.

"If it's alright, I'd like to offer you an item that will assist you until you achieve the desired results from your training."

"Is there such a thing? What is it?"

"It's an Awakener Control Device."

"A Control Device?"

"What is that? The name sounds a bit scary."

Seeing the apprehensive faces, Yuder explained in detail what the Control Device was. Though it was still a prototype and wouldn't completely inhibit abilities, Marty eagerly accepted it, convinced that it would help her prevent accidental activations.

"It's amazing that such a thing exists! Thank you. Now people who come into contact with me won't suddenly faint or stumble. I'm glad."

"If you could, please let me know how effective it is over time."

"Of course!"

Yuder handed over one of the Control Devices he had brought with him. As he was watching their retreating figures, a voice called out from behind him.

"I thought you brought that thing for the prisoners here, but it turns out that wasn't the case."

The voice belonged to Nathan Zuckerman, the next person Yuder had planned to visit.

'Well, that saves me the effort of searching for him.'

Yuder turned his head. The Southern knight was holding a box that looked familiar.

"That is..."

"It's a task from the Duke. As always, for his tea time."

Indeed, what he was carrying were the same snacks they had had when they were last in the West. The knight looked unfazed doing such a trivial task. His dignified demeanor of doing what had to be done left Yuder with nothing to say.

Instead of mentioning the box of snacks, Yuder decided to answer the question Nathan had posed.

"I thought it best to give it first to the one who needed it most since there are only a few of these items available now."

"Urgency, is it? I see."

Ordinarily, one would assume that prisoners should be given top priority. However, by Yuder's standards, Marty wasn't far behind in terms of importance.

"More importantly, may I have a moment to speak with you? I've been looking for Sir Zuckerman."

"What is it?"

"I have questions related to the Commander."

Beneath Nathan Zuckerman's stern forehead, his eyes blinked as if trying to gauge Yuder's sincerity. A moment later, without another word, he changed his direction to follow Yuder. It was a surprisingly quick decision, dispelling any notion that he might decline due to being busy.

"Do you have any issues with the Duke?"

"That's exactly the question I wish to ask you, Sir Zuckerman."

"Pardon?"

How could he even begin to explain this? It felt quite challenging, given that he had hardly ever brought up such a topic with others.

However, Nathan Zuckerman was Kishiar's most loyal subordinate, the one who had observed him the longest. If even he was unaware of Kishiar's anomalies, it was better to assume that no one else knew either.

After a moment of silent contemplation, Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

"The Commander is... without any issues, I assume. He'll be competently performing his duties today as usual."

"..."

"However, I've been feeling that something seems strangely off for some time now."

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"However, I've been feeling that something seems strangely off for some time now."

Feeling something was strange—it was a statement too vague to describe in detail, yet Nathan Zuckerman didn't ask Yuder what exactly he meant. He didn't even ask for a more detailed explanation.

Instead, he looked at Yuder thoughtfully for a long moment before asking just one question.

"When did you start feeling this way?"

When indeed? Yuder's memory started to rewind like a flying arrow—passing today, bypassing yesterday, and moving even further back in time.

"I'm not quite sure. I started becoming uneasy after I left the capital, I think..."

It was around that time that Yuder woke up sensing an unusual chill in Kishiar's absence. But then again, he had noticed Kishiar keeping a strategy game board by his side even before that. And he hadn't found it strange from the time he began paying attention to it...

"...Actually, subtle changes I hadn't noticed before seem to have been present even earlier."

Yuder sighed deeply as he met Nathan Zuckerman's gaze.

"I think it started after I took your advice, Sir Zuckerman, and had a conversation with the commander."

Yes, it had started the day they played a strategy game together. Kishiar had kept that board in his office ever since.

"..."

"At first, I didn't think it was strange. Even now, I wonder if I'm just being overly anxious. However..."

"Hmm. I don't think that's the case," Nathan Zuckerman replied swiftly.

"If Sir Yuder thinks something is off, then something must be there."

"Do you feel the same, Sir Zuckerman?"

"No."

The answer came back so fast it was almost disconcerting.

"From my perspective, there hasn't been much difference from usual."

"Even though he's been keeping the strategy game board by his side more often?"

"He did that at times when we were in Peletta too. When he had a particularly engaging match or faced a challenging problem, he would keep the board next to him for days, even during meals."

"Then why did you say what you just did?"

"Just because I don't find it strange doesn't mean you have to feel the same way."

"..."

"Isn't that how you feel?"

Those calmly spoken words brought Yuder's thoughts to a sudden halt.

"As far as I've observed, if Sir Yuder suspects something odd about the Commander, it's worth considering, even if there's no immediate reason to believe it. You know him better than anyone, don't you?"

It was strange. Nathan Zuckerman had always insisted on keeping a watchful eye on Yuder to protect Kishiar. But now, his words seemed to suggest the opposite.

However, his deep navy blue eyes displayed no wavering, as if stating an obvious truth. Somewhat flustered, Yuder murmured,

"Me, know him better?"

"If you don't think so, then that would be surprising."

"It's odd for me to say that I know the commander better when you are here, Sir Zuckerman."

"Well, knowing someone isn't simply a matter of time spent together. There are knights who have practiced swordsmanship for 20 years but know less about the sword than those who've trained for just one year, aren't there?"

The knight, who had given a response likely to raise the ire of anyone like Kiolle da Diarca, let out a contemplative hum. Moments later, he gestured with a box of sweets he had set aside during their conversation.

"It might be a bit odd to continue our conversation in this corner. Would you care to have some tea in my room?"

Life had led to this: sitting in Nathan Zuckerman's room, discussing matters about Kishiar over tea. Yuder sat in a neatly arranged guest room, which was identical in layout to the one he had been given. He looked down at the cup of tea and sweets that Nathan had offered. Although skeptical about immediately consuming the sweets that had been purchased on Kishiar's orders, he figured it didn't matter much to Kishiar. Yuder shrugged it off.

"Let's get to the point," Yuder said, raising his cup to his lips.

The knight opened his mouth promptly after glancing at Yuder sipping his tea.

"You may find it strange, but I can't say that I know everything about my lord."

"Haven't you served him since you were children?"

"Technically, since I was nine. His Highness, the Second Prince, took me in when he visited the southern palace to escape the summer heat. I was a lowly servant who couldn't even wash his feet properly at the time."

Yuder thought back; he had seen Nathan Zuckerman's face quite often in his previous life. This loyal knight had helped clean up the mess following the manifestation of his second gender, and there had even been a one-on-one duel between them when he had defied Kishiar.

'A significant incident where both of us ended up wounded, and I discovered that Nathan Zuckerman was a hidden Swordmaster.'

But he had never heard this level of detail before.

Perhaps Nathan was sharing a past he'd rather not talk about, but his voice showed no sign of hesitation.

"From a servant to a personal attendant, then eventually becoming the closest chief attendant and his sword disciple. After moving to Peletta, I served as his adjutant. However, serving someone so closely means that you have to willingly turn a blind eye to some aspects of their life."

The knight paused, his gaze seemingly probing the distant horizon as it got lost in the pale-red tea before him.

"I couldn't do anything to alleviate his greatest pain, and when he faced death, all I could do was fend off everyone in the castle, as per his wishes. That was the limit imposed on me."

"..."

"But you don't have to do that. You can do anything."

Those words sounded somewhat similar to what he had said to Yuder earlier about Kishiar, who had borrowed a few banned books. It was as if Nathan felt Yuder knew everything there was to know, not only about the Cavalry and the Knights of Peletta but also about Nathan himself, Kishiar, and others.

However, what was different now was the absence of the complicated look and inner turmoil that Nathan usually showed when he looked at Yuder.

After a moment of contemplation, Yuder asked, "But what if acting without certainty leads to unfavorable consequences for the Commander?"

The knight's eyes narrowed slightly.

"...It's somewhat surprising to hear such a thing from you, Sir Aile."

"What's so strange about it?"

"Nothing. Well, in any case, if you think something should be done, don't ask me. Just do as you see fit. I doubt that anything you do would result in unfavorable outcomes for my lord."

"..."

Nathan Zuckerman's unexpected words left Yuder feeling odd. The strangeness magnified when considering their relationship in a previous life.

"If you need my help in this matter, I'll listen first and assist where I can. I do owe you a great debt, after all."

Yuder remained silent for a long while. A sense of uncertainty, like a fleeting mirage, slowly began to coalesce and settle in his chest.

Throughout the long pause as Yuder gathered his thoughts, Nathan Zuckerman silently sipped his tea, patiently waiting for a response.

That respectful distance finally gave Yuder the assurance he needed.

'Perhaps this current turmoil is due to Kishiar hiding something from me. Once I uncover it, everything will end.'

Yuder downed the lukewarm tea in a single gulp, looked at the now-empty cup that had somehow gone unnoticed, and nodded.

"Thank you for your advice. I'll handle it from here."

"Yes."

"But I have one question. What do you think is the most likely reason for Kishiar acting normal, even hiding his true intentions from both of us?"

"I'm not certain if this will suffice as an answer," Nathan Zuckerman's weighty voice filled the room, "but from what I know, when my lord hides something while maintaining an appearance of calm, it is usually because he finds it difficult to control himself."

Difficult to control himself.

The myriad implications of those words brushed Yuder's mind like a flash of light.

Kishiar was a generous and considerate man, but Yuder knew there was one aspect in which he became utterly unyielding: it was Kishiar himself.

"Understood. Thank you."

With a nod to Nathan Zuckerman, Yuder left the room.

...

"Next! Applicant number 439, Seeker!"

One of the applicants for the second round of recruitment of Cavalry in the west stepped forward. As the robust young man let out a shout, his leg muscles explosively swelled.

"Huah!"

With a stomp, his body soared high into the sky. Those watching let out exclamations of admiration.

"Woah..."

Moments later, the young man landed back on the ground, creating a large indentation with the sheer force of his landing. He was an exceptional Awakener, able to jump as high as a fortress wall just by using the strength of his legs alone.

'But if we hire that guy, within a year, he will quit and we'll find out he's a spy sent from the aristocratic faction. Acting like a sincere fellow, he would have taken a year's worth of information and fled.'

Yuder, observing the man with a chilly gaze, swiftly drew a line through the name written on the paper before him. Seeker would not be joining the Cavalry this time.

Kishiar, sitting beside him, quietly muttered, "Another rejection, huh."

"Yes."

"There are more failing here than in the East."

"If you find it regrettable, you could pass him."

"As if I would do that."

A smile appeared at the corner of Kishiar's mouth. Yuder studied that bright smile a little longer, and more closely, than usual.

Since the night they had drunk alcohol while playing a strategy game at Baron Koelt's residence, Kishiar hadn't repeated the same activity. Whether Kishiar's behavior was intentional, knowing that Yuder felt something was amiss, Yuder couldn't tell. Regardless, he hadn't found the opportunity to ask.

‘No, at this point, it's safe to say it was intentional.’

From morning, there had been about three instances where Kishiar would skillfully interrupt or make light of the situation whenever Yuder tried to look at him too long or speak earnestly. Kishiar was a master of subtle rhetoric, so subtle that even Yuder had a hard time picking up on it.

‘See, even now...’

"Why are you staring at me for so long? I doubt you find this changed face more appealing than my usual one."

Kishiar turned his head, catching Yuder's gaze, and narrowed his eyes.

"...Your hair got disheveled when the applicant shook the ground just now."

"Really? I didn't notice."

Kishiar combed his hair a few times nonchalantly and then bent his head down with unabashed confidence, asking Yuder to fix it for him. Hesitant for a moment, Yuder reached out and touched his now ordinary brown hair. Despite appearing rough to the eye, the texture felt as smooth as usual under his fingers.

As he straightened Kishiar's hair, Yuder found himself realizing just how vulnerable he had become to the man.

‘That's why I even went to consult with Nathan Zuckerman.’

Not wanting to act without certainty meant not wanting to cause Kishiar even a sliver of pain due to his own miscalculations. He didn't want to see the man suffer any further because of him.

The only thing that could make Yuder feel that way was Kishiar alone.

"I'm disqualified? Why? What am I lacking?"

Just then, the shout of an applicant who had been told he was disqualified filled the air. Every stomp he made shook the ground as if it would crumble, causing the area where they sat to sway wildly. Screams of terror tore through the air.

Frowning, Yuder raised his hand.

The wind and earth obeyed him, moving fluidly to align with his will.

"Argh!"

Caught in a sudden gust of wind full of dirt, the rampaging applicant covered his face and rolled on the ground. The once unstable terrain instantly stabilized. Sensing the immense power behind the movement, the Awakeners all turned their heads toward Yuder.

In their gazes filled with both fear and awe, Yuder stood up slowly and addressed the rejected applicant.

"People like you who only rely on your own strength and run wild have no place in the Cavalry. Make sure you pass that message on to those who come after you."

"Wh-what...?"

"Get lost."

"Argh!"

With a flick of Yuder's wrist, the man was swept up in a gust of wind and sent flying over the wall. As his screams grew fainter in the distance, so did the attention of those who had been watching.

"..."

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After smoothly eliminating one troublesome candidate, the rest of the test proceeded in a rather solemn atmosphere. No one else dared to make a fuss over their disqualification notices.

However, the atmosphere surrounding the testing area had completely transformed.

The candidates who had originally come to take the exam had not paid much attention to the two judges sitting in the corner of the room. The judges were known to be existing members of the Cavalry, but they had deliberately concealed their names and their appearance was sufficiently nondescript.

But as it turned out, one of them was none other than the famous Yuder Aile.

"Good heavens! The very man who rose from a commoner to receive a baronetcy from the Emperor was here and not in the capital?"

"I've never seen anyone handle such colossal power so effortlessly. If it isn't Yuder Aile, who single-handedly demolished half of the Great Sarain Forest, who else could wield such power?"

"That's a terrifying force. And to think that he's not even a Deputy Commander but just an assistant to the Cavalry Commander... Can I really join this Cavalry?"

Wind and earth. It was already a remarkable feat to wield these two arduous natural elements at once, yet he managed it all while preventing anyone nearby from interfering.

After effortlessly sending a candidate flying, not a bead of sweat appeared on his face as he returned to his seat. His demeanor reminded people of a predator guarding its territory. Those who felt pricked by his aura couldn't help but get goosebumps, while others looked on in awe.

Unsurprisingly, after the day's testing was over, numerous Awakeners flocked towards the judge's seat where Yuder had been sitting.

But Yuder was already gone.

"Huh? He's not here..."

"He was definitely sitting here just a moment ago; where did he go?"

"..."

"Everyone looks disappointed. Shouldn't we go down and chat a bit?"

While candidates wandered around the judge's area with glum faces or sought out other Cavalry members they had tested with, Yuder was watching them from high up in the sky.

Despite floating in the sky, not a single gust of wind stirred around him, and he seemed as stable as if he were standing on the ground. Had his floating been powered by the wind, it would have been difficult to remain so steadfast and tranquil.

'And ascending this quickly without anyone noticing would've been difficult as well.'

The force that had shot him up into the sky as soon as he had risen from his seat was all thanks to Kishiar, whose hand he was currently holding.

Yuder turned his head toward the man who must still be exerting a considerable force to keep them afloat.

"If we go down now, people will become curious about your identity as well, Commander."

"That's a valid point."

Despite exerting immense energy to keep both of them floating at the same height, Kishiar's face appeared utterly relaxed. Apparently, his reservoir of power could easily handle it.

The man, wearing a neat smile, tilted his head.

"Shall we leave the testing area and descend? If you're scared, hold on tight."

Kishiar began to walk leisurely through the empty air, as if strolling on flat ground. Although there was nothing underfoot, walking alongside him felt as if some unseen force was supporting them—as if invisible land and stairs existed.

While Yuder was accustomed to running on the wind, this experience was unfamiliar but not frightening.

The warm sunlight pushed back the chill of winter air. Long, pale fingers covered in gloves aimlessly swayed between moments of comfortable silence. Surely, there had never been more than a few people in this world who had enjoyed such a simple yet extraordinary walk.

The only regret was... due to the gloves Yuder wore, the warmth of their clasped hands couldn't be felt directly.

"Why do you keep fidgeting? Are you uncomfortable?"

"No."

Perhaps sensing Yuder's disappointment, Kishiar paused in his steps and turned his head. Hesitant, Yuder released the gloved hand he had been holding. Before Kishiar's gaze could change subtly, Yuder quickly pulled off his glove and stuffed it carelessly into his pocket, then spoke.

"I was just debating whether to take off the glove. Now that I have, may I hold your hand again?"

"Ah..."

Kishiar chuckled once more.

"So that's what it was. Of course, it's fine with me."

This time, Yuder took the initiative, sliding his fingers back into Kishiar's hand.

"Isn't it cold?"

"It's fine."

Even though Yuder's hand, warmed by the insulating glove, met Kishiar's colder hand, it felt unexpectedly pleasing.

"Are you not uncomfortable with my rough hands?"

"Why would I be? Haven't I said they make you even more intriguing and charming?"

Kishiar grinned, teasingly. Yuder, rather than returning the smile, looked down at their clasped hands.

"I also think that's what makes it even better."

For a moment, Kishiar was silent but then subtly tightened his grip on Yuder's hand. In response, Yuder exerted even greater force. A new warmth circulated between the concave parts of their palms—a small, warm space that no chill could invade.

Amidst this pleasant silence, Yuder took a quick glance at Kishiar's smiling face.

'Now would be a good time to say something.'

They were alone, high up where nobody else's gaze could reach them; no need to worry about the opinions of others. It was perhaps the best time to discuss the subtle changes he noticed in Kishiar.

But... seeing that smile, how could he think that it could contain something unknown, even to Yuder?

Instead, what flowed from Yuder's mouth was a slightly different question.

"When do you plan to leave the west?"

"As soon as the second test wraps up. I have some things to take care of, but I don't expect it'll take more than three days."

Kishiar answered without hesitation.

"Is there anything else you need to do?"

"You remember that Baron Koelt has been continuously investigating the documents that came from the fourth floor of the dungeon, right?"

"You're talking about the illustrations and observation notes related to monsters studied by the First Tain Duke?"

"Exactly. After examining all of those, using the ancient language references the Duke had, it turns out he sent all the by-products and corpses of the monsters he studied to some specific regions and places."

It was a detail not thoroughly documented before.

"According to the Baron's speculation, it's somewhere between the west and the south. Since we're heading south after the west, we might as well stop by. There's also another place near there we need to visit."

"Where else?"

"The place where the Crown Prince had someone collect poisonous mushrooms. Fortunately, it's not too far from the previously mentioned location. It's quite remote, but at our pace, it shouldn't take long to get there."

The poisonous mushroom that Crown Prince Katchian had secretly obtained to kill Lenore Shand Apeto—it was a matter that had seemingly come to an end. Yuder had preemptively identified the mushroom with future information and informed Kishiar, aiming to sever the relationship between Apeto and the Crown Prince permanently.

"Did another issue arise from that past event?"

"No, rather the opposite, actually."

A smooth, icy smile floated across Kishiar's face.

"I had ordered a re-investigation of that mushroom. You see, it's not unique to the area where the Crown Prince obtained it, and I found myself curious as to why he would specifically go there to get it."

"So, did you find anything?"

"You know the saying, 'A suspicious man only treads on ground he has walked before?'"

Upon hearing the old saying, Yuder instantly understood what Kishiar was trying to discover.

'He must've suspected that the Crown Prince had deeper ties to that land, and that's why he obtained the mushroom there.'

If Kishiar was willing to go and check the place himself, he must've grasped some sort of clue.

As if confirming Yuder's thoughts, the man continued.

"When the Crown Prince first appeared in the capital, Duke Diarca introduced him as an Eastern-born noble. Specifically, he was said to be the child of the Duke's cousin's daughter. A fine young lord of noble lineage who had lost his parents early but grew up well with the support of the Diarca family. Katchian La Orr was as distinguished—or rather, as undistinguished—as any other candidate for Crown Prince."

By that logic, the Crown Prince should've had no ties to a remote western village. But what was the actual situation?

Yuder was well aware of how deeply suspicious Katchian La Orr was. The Crown Prince wanted to know everything he held in his hands, and he was extremely cautious about anything beyond his control.

There was no way he would've used an unknown poison from an unfamiliar area to discretely kill someone and frame Kishiar.

The Crown Prince must've known that area well in advance.

"That particular area has no known connection to the Diarca family, I presume?"

"Correct. No connection at all. My speculation as to why the Crown Prince obtained the mushroom there may well differ from the actual reason. Someone else might've helped him, or some unknown factor could've played a role."

"But if your speculation is correct, and we can secure evidence to that effect...it would be monumental."

"Exactly."

Kishiar readily agreed.

"When we re-investigated the village where the mushroom was refined, we found out that some nobles had visited there a few years back to spend the summer. Intriguingly, the Diarca family name suddenly popped up. Isn't that enough reason for us to go and verify things for ourselves?"

Indeed, it was. Sending underlings might lead to some oversight, but the odds of that happening were extremely low if Kishiar and he went themselves.

"When did you manage to conduct such an investigation?"

"I only ordered the re-investigation recently. We were just lucky."

A humble remark attributing everything to luck.

Yet that single word calmed Yuder's excitement, allowing his rationality to settle back in place.

...

Feeling something strange, he looked again, only to find Kishiar smiling.

"Well, we've reached the house of Baron Koelt. I've been supervising the test and even exerted some effort today, so after dinner, you should take a rest."

"Will you not be resting, Commander?"

"Of course, I'll rest as well."

Upon hearing his response, Yuder slightly furrowed his brow, then relaxed it.

"...You truly intend to rest, don't you?"

"Oh? You think I'd pretend to rest? Sadly, I don't possess that kind of talent."

The man chuckled, tilting his head playfully. Yuder took a deep breath and looked into his face.

Even behind the mask of face alteration magic, those eyes were focused solely on him. Lips that seemed like they would answer any question he had honestly stared back at Yuder with serene assurance.

"...In that case, may I come and check on you?"

"Of course. You're always welcome."

"What I mean is, would it be alright if I continue to sleep in your room tomorrow, and the days after that?"

At that, for the first time, Kishiar's expression subtly changed.

Chapter 604

"Hmm... Before I answer, I have a question that I think needs to be addressed first. The 'time' is drawing near; is that going to be a problem?"

The 'time' referred to was, of course, the heat period. Yuder knew full well the risks involved in committing to spend nights with another individual with a second gender when it was unclear when or how the mating urge would manifest.

'A few months ago, I wouldn't have dared to bring this up, no matter how concerned I was.'

But now was different. Yuder met the man's scrutinizing gaze head-on, a gaze that was simultaneously filled with concern for him.

"That's a bit redundant, don't you think? If it were a problem, I wouldn't have come this far in the first place."

The words might have sounded indifferent, but the implications were anything but trivial. Yuder looked intently at the man who was silently watching him and added decisively,

"Or is there another reason you find it difficult to keep inviting me?"

"Why would that be?"

Eventually, Kishiar let out a chuckle as if admitting defeat, raising his hand. A long sigh escaped from his lips, sweeping across his own face.

"It seems my assistant had good reason for wanting to keep a close eye on me, didn't you?"

"I won't deny it."

"Good. Do whatever you wish, then."

Kishiar openly expressed his consent.

Feeling emboldened, Yuder immediately moved his belongings to Kishiar's bedroom that night.

"...So, nothing else has happened since?"

The next day, Nathan Zuckerman quietly inquired. He and Yuder were having another discreet meeting to exchange information related to Kishiar's activities.

The knight, upon learning that Yuder had moved into Kishiar's bedroom, didn't seem particularly surprised and simply asked for a brief update on the situation. A convenient conversational partner for information exchange, indeed.

"Yes. After wrapping up work as usual, he spoke with me and then fell asleep. I stayed awake until dawn to be sure."

"But you're not going to let your guard down just because of one quiet night, are you?"

"Of course not. I plan to continue keeping an eye on him."

Hearing Yuder's resolute answer, Nathan Zuckerman silently replaced the empty dessert bowl on the table. A new pie appeared in its place, reminiscent of a monster that keeps respawning no matter how many times it's defeated.

"How has it been on your end, Sir Zuckerman? Anything unusual?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary on my end, but..."

"Was there something else on your mind?"

"When I stepped away from the Duke for a brief moment due to work and returned, I felt a slight change in the flow of surrounding energies. It was similar to the change that often occurs when using magic tools, although I can't be certain."

"Magic tools, you say... I see."

After a few more rounds of strictly business-like conversation, Yuder stood up to leave. Nathan Zuckerman cleared away the empty dishes and offered him something. Upon taking a closer look, it was a medicinal tablet made from ground leaves.

"What is this?"

"It's a recovery agent provided by the Peletta Knights for night watch duties. You didn't sleep much last night, and it's likely you won't get much sleep in the future either, so please take it."

"I'll be fine..."

"It won't hurt to have it. If even a hint of sleep deprivation shows on your face, the Duke will notice right away. Just take it."

And so, Yuder accepted the tablet, still a bit bewildered but grateful.

Mentioning Kishiar's name made it difficult to refuse. Yuder accepted with a subtle expression of gratitude and ate it.

Three more days passed.

Kishiar remained unchanged. Yuder vigilantly observed him, even cutting back on sleep, but Kishiar no longer engaged in strategy games; he simply slept peacefully.

Thanks to that, Yuder also experienced peaceful nights without waking up to the sudden cold, as he used to. Although he lacked some sleep, considering there were days in his previous life when he would go without sleep to complete missions, this was a small inconvenience.

'The recovery potion given by Nathan Zuckerman turned out to be surprisingly effective.'

Today was the last day he would spend in the west anyway. Yuder meticulously observed the Awakeners taking their tests, evaluating their potential, abilities, and information.

Among the western candidates, many had promising qualities. In particular, those who caught Yuder's eye were Awakeners from the Star of Nagan's western base, who had been rescued along with Marty. They were originally non-Awakeners, but became awakened after coming to their senses under the care of the Western Branch, gaining remarkably powerful defensive abilities due to their difficult pasts.

'If they and people like Marty grow well, the western branch will have unparalleled defensive capabilities.'

Branch Leader Emun's abilities also involved hiding in the shadows, so they would mesh well with such individuals. Their future growth was promising.

In his previous life, each regional branch had Awakeners with particular tendencies. Now that he somewhat understood how these abilities manifested, he could guess how such patterns were established.

However, every positive aspect has a flip side.

Among the western candidates, there were many who had ulterior motives, including spies. Many fled after Yuder exposed one, but he still caught several afterward.

Most were mercenaries sent by the western nobles.

Emun and the existing members of the western branch were shocked that they couldn't filter these people out in the preliminary round, but they quickly channeled their shock into anger and pride.

It was only natural, given how well the Commander and his assistant kept everyone in line.

'Emun did do something good, at least.'

Busy as he was, Emun did a fantastic job identifying the potential in an Awakener who might have been kicked out without even taking the preliminary exam. When Yuder saw the Awakener's name on the list for the second round, he felt the same way as when he first encountered Kanna Wand at the application center.

That very person now stood before Yuder for the final test.

"Hello... I am Gloe."

Gloe, a commoner girl without a family name. Currently only sixteen, she was the one who had served the longest as both the Deputy Commander of Jung Division and Deputy Commander of Shin Division in the Cavalry that Yuder led in a previous life.

'Originally from a wandering troupe. Spent her childhood reading cards for money.'

Fittingly, her awakened ability also manifested through the worn-out cards she carried.

"My ability is to read these cards to give you blessings you'll need in the future. I can only do it once a day... but the effects are certain."

The long, unkempt black hair that mostly covered the face and the somber voice made the word "blessing" sound almost like a curse. Occasionally, there were those who rubbed their arms with a shiver, seemingly sharing the same sentiment.

"Could it be real? I can't believe it..."

"A blessing for the future? Such a vague ability, isn't it? How did she pass the first round?"

"Hey, Emun. Why did you pass her?"

Someone among the members poked Emun's side, to which Emun shook his head with a firm expression.

"Just watch. Her ability is real."

'Yes, it's real. And quite impressive at that.'

"I will now demonstrate my ability... Is there anyone who would like a reading from me?"

When Gloe scanned the surroundings, everyone deliberately avoided eye contact. Emun, who had passed her in the first round, was the exception as he couldn't participate.

Yuder, noticing Gloe's growing discomfort, raised his hand.

"Do it for me."

"Ah! Yes... Understood..."

It seemed Gloe recognized who Yuder was, as her face turned even paler. The atmosphere around her grew colder, as if the temperature had dropped by about 5 degrees, but Yuder didn't mind and stepped forward.

Gloe shuffled some old cards on the table and drew five.

"Choose one card from these five."

Without hesitation, Yuder picked the middle card. The flipped card depicted a jester with a pointy hat, playing a trumpet and dancing. Gloe softly uttered the card's name.

"Festival of the Trumpeting Jester."

At that moment, a faint and transparent mist rose from the card and seeped into Yuder. It was a warm and mysterious sensation.

"A blessing has been cast upon you, which will protect you from a single impending danger."

"Really?"

"I can't tell from here..."

"A danger to Yuder's body? Can such a thing even happen? I doubt we can verify this blessing's effect."

As the western members murmured and questioned the authenticity of the blessing, Gloe looked lost.

"No, usually the blessings are immediately verifiable or at least within a day... I'm not lying. It's real."

"I understand."

"Yes?"

"It means you've passed."

"Yes?"

"Thank you for applying to the Cavalry so early. If you ever think of coming to the capital, let Emun Philang know anytime. We'll arrange a place for you."

"...What?!"

While Gloe was doubting her ears, Yuder asked her one more thing. After hearing her answer, he returned to his judging seat. Kishiar, who had been sitting with his arms crossed, tilted his head and asked,

"Was she that impressive?"

"Though it's called a blessing, it's closer to foresight. It's a great fortune that she came to the Cavalry this early."

From what Yuder knew, the types of blessings Gloe's cards could bestow weren't many, but they varied in intensity. In other words, if one knew in advance which blessing would be bestowed, they could guess the nature and intensity of the impending danger.

Kishiar nodded after hearing the story.

"So, what did the assistant ask her at the end?"

"I asked how strong the blessing from that card was."

"And her answer?"

"She said it was the strongest blessing her cards could currently bestow."

Realizing the implications, Kishiar's eyes changed slightly.

"That means..."

"It seems my journey from the west to the south won't be as smooth as I'd hoped."

However, he had the chance to prepare in advance, so in a way, it was a stroke of luck.

That's what he thought as he responded, but Kishiar seemed to have a slightly different idea.

"We were told we'd see results within a day, right? In that case, we should delay our departure by a day."

"There's really no need to do that..."

"It's fine. Isn't it better to stay here, where we can control the risks, than to be exposed to uncontrollable dangers outside?"

In the end, Kishiar postponed the departure date from the west by one day.

'Hmm... The healing potion that Nathan Zuckerman gave me has also worn off... Well, one more day should be fine.'

However, in the early hours of the next day, Yuder suddenly woke up.

Confused as to when he had fallen asleep, Yuder blinked his eyes. Just then, a faint clicking sound echoed in the darkness.

His confusion evaporated instantly, replaced by a bone-chilling cold. Instinctively feeling for the spot next to him, he found it empty.

Yuder realized this was the perfect opportunity to investigate Kishiar's strange behavior.

Chapter 605

The lodging where Kishiar stayed was the largest room in an old mansion owned by the frugal and conservative Baron Koelt. The mansion had rooms with multiple purposes, all connected by a

confusing array of doors. Anyone unfamiliar with the layout could easily find themselves wandering in circles, eventually ending up outside. It was an invaluable mechanism designed to protect the owner of the house.

Navigating through such a place in complete darkness without even a single lamp lit would be difficult for most. But not for Yuder. He moved as naturally as if he were walking in broad daylight, deftly avoiding obstacles.

Ever since his eye had become an Eye of Magic, Yuder had hardly been inconvenienced by darkness, even when his eye wasn't glowing its gold hue.

Click. A faint sound reached his ears once more. Perhaps because he was getting closer, the nature of the sound was now more clearly discernable.

The momentary noise of hard stones colliding.

There was no mistaking it—it was undoubtedly the sound of pieces hitting the board in a strategy game.

Was Kishiar playing a strategy game by himself?

‘Why at this time? Alone...’

No. Let's hold off on the questions until he confirmed the situation firsthand. Yuder focused even more, dampening his presence to an extraordinary extent. Knights were trained to mask their presence through physical control, but Yuder was capable of achieving the same effect, but more brilliantly, when necessary.

Whoosh...

Wind power, summoned by his will, wrapped around Yuder's feet and body without making a sound. A sensation as if the subtle air currents around him had suddenly stilled washed over him, silencing all noise. Now, there were very few in the world who would be aware of Yuder's movements, no matter what he did.

It was the first time he'd gone to such lengths to mask his presence since his return. And it had to be now, of all times.

But what could he do? If something inexplicable was happening with Kishiar, then Yuder had to find out what it was.

As he continued walking, his heightened senses guided him like invisible limbs groping through the air, leading him in the right direction.

Just as he rounded a fireplace, passed a long bookshelf along the wall, and was about to cross the third door—finally, a faint outline of someone appeared in the darkness. Yuder deftly halted his steps.

Even if the shimmering golden locks weren't visible, there was no room for doubt about who it was. The blood coursing through his veins screamed it.

He had finally found Kishiar.

But Kishiar's appearance was both as Yuder had suspected and startlingly different.

The man sat alone before a hexagonal board, his hands moving as if unaffected by the darkness. The rhythmic click, click sounds resonated continuously.

His movements looked as usual, but the state of the board he shaped with those hands in the quietude was slightly different.

White pieces captured black, then black captured white in turn. The fluid movements traced a trajectory that seemed strangely familiar.

'That's... the review of our second game, isn't it?'

His heart rate involuntarily quickened at the startling realization.

Kishiar was not simply playing a game by himself; he was recreating the game they had played together, reviewing it move by move.

The order of the pieces they had placed then was revived perfectly by Kishiar's alternating hands placing black and white pieces. Even the momentary hesitation that Yuder had felt during that game was flawlessly reenacted. Staring blankly at the spectacle, it wasn't long before the game neared its end.

The moment the last key-like tile slotted in among the strategically scattered white tiles, a meticulously calculated, beautiful formation revealed itself. It was a formation that resembled wings, as if enveloping everything within its reach—a perfect net with no room for the enemy to escape.

The second game would certainly have ended with the completion of this formation, but Kishiar began moving his hand again without even sparing a glance at the finished product.

All the tiles returned to their original places, reverting to their initial state. The movements that followed were no different than before. The only slight difference was that this time he was reviewing the moves from their first game.

It was then that Yuder finally realized.

This was not something Kishiar had done once or twice.

It was more than just a review of the game's moves. What was being recreated at Kishiar's fingertips was not just the game's circumstances but the entire flow of words and emotions that had been exchanged between them that day.

One couldn't replicate this without having memorized every single aspect of that moment.

While the movements were undeniably rhythmic and elegant, the aura they emitted was far removed from calmness or serenity.

A tranquility that refrained from even a hint of warmth.

A silence that echoed like an anxious scream.

Watching the tiles being laid down by those automatically moving fingers, Yuder felt a sudden chill spreading in his chest. That momentary sensation, which made the hairs on his body stand on end, disappeared in the blink of an eye. And yet, that allowed him to understand its nature more clearly.

‘This is...’

It wasn't something Yuder had sensed upon waking up; it was a strong emotion that seemed to surge from afar and vanish like an ebbing tide, leaving only its afterimage.

A chill devoid of any warmth, though brief, had considerable impact.

The nerves that had tensed up to their limits were fraying at the edges, and the frozen tension felt like it was pounding at the flesh from the inside. It was an aspect he never thought he'd sense from Kishiar.

Unknowingly, Yuder flinched and bit his lip.

Meanwhile, Kishiar had finished reviewing the second game and was rearranging the tiles. His face, hidden in the darkness, looked as if he was just another person engrossed in the game. However, it no longer appeared that way to Yuder.

Some movements can seem so slow and peaceful that they paradoxically induce a sense of quiet anxiety.

‘Yes... anxiety.’

Unbelievable as it was, the man who looked utterly serene was reviewing the games in a state of utter anxiety. As if endlessly repeating the games that encompassed all the experiences Yuder had ever had in his previous life would reveal something unknown.

The cold emotions that seemed to be skimming the surface were not directed outward but inward, toward Kishiar himself. It was the result of an anxiety that he couldn't restrain, even though he knew he shouldn't be feeling it.

‘Has it been like this ever since that day?’

He was relieved because he trusted him, because he accepted what he said.

It had seemed fine; he had appeared to be looking for a new path for the future, which was why he had been truly relieved.

The sincerity in his smiling face, even when he joked about conquering the world, had undoubtedly been genuine.

However, the silent anxiety he was witnessing now was also likely a part of what Kishiar had felt that day.

Even as he mingled with Yuder, a portion of his own relentless, unsparing stubbornness—something he had endeavored to hide until the very end—was present here.

The face of the man, forever cycling between that day's defeat and victory, was as flawless and beautiful as a chiseled sculpture, a beauty that only served to claw painfully at one's heart.

'...'

Images of Kishiar that Yuder had seen over time rapidly flickered through his mind.

Kishiar, engrossed in watching a strategy game board, citing it as reminiscent of old times. The soft glint in his eyes when they shared jokes, laughter, and kisses for the sheer joy of the moment. The same game board that never left his office desk, even amidst his busyness.

To Yuder Aile, Kishiar had always acted with consistent honesty, always maintaining an air of composure. However, in matters he deemed unnecessary, he ruthlessly suppressed and concealed his own feelings, feeling no obligation to be forthright.

Presumably, Kishiar must have thought his own anxiety and negative emotions wouldn't be of any help to Yuder, nor to the situation at hand.

It was indeed a rational conclusion.

But was it the perfect conclusion? Certainly not.

An inexplicable heat surged violently within his chest, hotter even than when a hot poker was pressed into a wound. Something ablaze scorched the inside of his throat, eyes, head, and some other unidentifiable places.

He felt stupid for having been overly trusting of Kishiar until now. An unjustified thought that he shouldn't have done so invaded his being.

The moment Yuder bit his lip even harder, Kishiar's latest introspection came to an end. For a moment, Kishiar reached out as if to replay his introspection, then hesitated as if recalling something.

The next moment, Kishiar slowly caressed the inner part of the ring on his right hand with his left hand. As far as Yuder knew, the ring was certainly a magic tool for altering one's appearance. As Kishiar touched not the embedded gem but the inner metal part, a faint light emanated from his palm, emitting a powder of light. A golden magic power gently descended upon Kishiar.

To an ordinary person, it would have seemed to end there, but Yuder saw, through his special vision, how that magic power affected Kishiar's body.

The skin, imbued with particles of light, faintly glowed as his complexion returned. His lips, which were a bit paler than usual, and his eyes, which had sunk coldly and dried up, all regained their natural moisture.

It resembled, perhaps even exceeded, the effect of receiving vitality-enhancing divine power from a priest.

“Nathan Zukerman said that while he was away for a while yesterday, he felt a change in the flow around Kishiar, similar to when he used a magic tool.”

He had assumed that Kishiar might have briefly experimented with the facial-altering magic tool, but now that he saw the results, he knew otherwise.

Yuder decided that there was no longer any need for restraint. He withdrew the still wind that had been wrapping around him.

No sooner had he done so than Kishiar turned his head.

Their gazes met in the darkness.

"...So it's come to this."

A soft murmur escaped from between Kishiar's lips.

Chapter 606

Kishiar was a man incredibly adept at reading the room, almost to the point where you might think he could read minds. Meeting Yuder's gaze, Kishiar seemed to immediately sense that Yuder hadn't just arrived. He maintained silence, offering no excuses.

Slowly, Yuder advanced until he stood close to him. He halted at a distance where he could reach out and touch the strategy game board on the table.

Even though he had only been here for less than a week, the game board was covered in faint marks, visible up close. Seeing the marks, particularly concentrated in certain spots, gave him a feeling akin to having a knife twisted in his gut.

Yuder was about to express his emotions openly, but he stopped short upon locking eyes with Kishiar's red irises.

It's good that he's seen everything and learned the truth. But what would be the most appropriate thing to say in this situation?

Why are you doing this?

Why did you hide this from me?

I've always suspected something. Now that I've seen everything, can you please be honest?

"..."

No. None of these questions seemed fitting for a conversation with Kishiar.

'I don't want to interrogate him.'

The questions he'd thought of sounded accusatory, as if he were talking to a criminal caught in the act. This was the first time that his lack of eloquence felt overwhelmingly cumbersome.

Growing frustrated with himself, Yuder sighed heavily. Finally, Kishiar broke the silence.

"You look vexed. You have a lot on your mind, don't you?"

"Indeed, it's painfully clear that I lack the gift of gab."

"It doesn't matter. Just say what you want to say. I'll listen."

"That's exactly why I'm hesitating. I don't want to say it carelessly."

"Even if I won't take it that way?"

"To me, it matters."

"A difficult issue, isn't it."

Yuder looked at Kishiar, whose lips faintly curled upward, and impulsively asked, "What would you say first in a situation like this?"

"Are you asking me what I would say to myself?"

"Is that not allowed?"

After his somewhat argumentative response, Yuder briefly regretted it. His bad mood had given rise to a defiant tone, something he hadn't employed in a long time. Yet Kishiar did not point this out; he just let out an even deeper laugh.

"Of course, there's no rule that says you can't."

"..."

"If it were me, well, I'd scan the surroundings of the person I'm speaking to and say whatever comes to mind first. It's a good way to start a conversation."

Yuder glanced around the area where Kishiar sat.

A moment later, words flowed from his pallid lips in a voice slightly slower and heavier than usual.

"You haven't lit a single lamp or even put on an overcoat."

"..."

"It must be cold. Let me light the fire first."

No hand movement was needed. The moment Yuder blinked, a spark ignited in a small wall furnace and various lamps scattered around the room.

Following that, a thin stream of water gracefully flew through the air, filling two empty teacups. A breeze carried some tea leaves into the cups, and soon, warm steam began to rise from them.

Yuder pushed one of the completed cups of tea toward Kishiar.

"Please drink."

Kishiar, who had been staring pensively at his cup, eventually picked it up. Yuder, who had been slightly anxious about whether he would drink it, finally took his own seat across from him and sipped his share of the tea.

The warmth of the brewed water seemed to stabilize the boiling turmoil within. His mind became clearer. Kishiar's way of initiating conversation was indeed effective.

‘So... the important thing is the solution, not the situation itself.’

Yuder decided on what to say after taking a few more sips.

Deeply rooted in Kishiar La Orr's unusual behavior was a habit of suppressing himself to the extreme. He was incredibly harsh on himself, but his positive disposition and strong will allowed him to laugh off even the toughest challenges. This was the primary reason for his current state. However, the perfect shield of rationality and patience wasn't all there was to Kishiar.

He was, after all, human. Just because he could endure what most couldn't didn't mean he had no limits. The recent events were a good example, but Yuder knew of times when Kishiar had reached his limits even more profoundly.

It was Kishiar La Orr from his past life.

"When I told you about my experiences through the strategy games, there was one thing I didn't mention."

Kishiar blinked rapidly, perhaps finding the statement unexpected.

"I should have told you about the previous Commander, even if you thought it wasn't important."

Kishiar's fingers, which had been playing with his cup, stopped.

"Do you think I acted this way because of that? I didn't. And that story..."

"Yes. You said to speak when everything becomes clear and I want to tell. But it's not like the other things were so clear that I had to speak of them first, so it doesn't matter, does it?"

A golden light shimmered in Yuder's determined dark eyes.

"I want to tell you now. And you promised to listen to anything I had to say."

So, in front of Yuder's silent plea, Kishiar couldn't say anything more. Yuder moistened his dry lips with tea and took a deep breath.

He hadn't expected to talk about the Kishiar from his past life to the current Kishiar in this manner. But then, when had anything related to Kishiar ever gone as Yuder had planned?

Even after turning back time, the man before him had never acted as Yuder had predicted.

Perhaps that unpredictability was why they had the relationship they did now.

All the uncertainties, fears, deep regrets, and now-forgotten anger were gathered by Yuder to say the only thing he could for the man before him.

Even if Kishiar felt deeply disappointed or harbored negative feelings after hearing this story.

Still... it had to be done.

No, he desperately wanted to.

"You might only know the current me, but I know a different you."

"..."

"He was a Commander with cracks in his vessel, who had to watch those around him leave first. He stepped down, handing his position to a commoner, only to be assassinated by the very successor he had chosen."

Yuder stared into the eyes that seemed frozen in time, filled with old pain.

He must have had some idea from the clues and conversations they'd had so far. He wasn't overly surprised, but he was still shocked. The spreading emotions proved it.

"Yes, that successor was me."

"Yuder."

Kishiar called out his name in a low moan. Yuder didn't respond.

"After returning here, I realized that my memories from that time are not as clear as I thought they might be. There may be details I'm unaware of, but what is certain is that I undertook the task and completed it quite successfully. I can't deny that. For now, I'd like to start by talking about the kind of person the Commander was at that time."

"..."

Yuder began his tale, idly fiddling with a piece before him.

It all started when a twenty-year-old kid from the countryside managed to join the Cavalry and received his first greeting from the Commander.

"Initially, I don't think the situation was much different from now. It seemed that the issue with the Commander's leadership arose after the mission to retrieve the Red Stone."

However, after that, Kishiar was no longer able to manage the unit in the same meticulous way. Their first personal encounter during a swordsmanship training session, something they had once dreamt about, also occurred around that time.

"The Commander noticed me during his night rounds. I was absorbed in my swordsmanship training, isolated from the rest of the unit. That was the beginning."

"Capturing my mistakes masterfully, a sense of competitiveness grew within me, leading me to train rigorously. Apparently, the effort was not in vain; my name was called during the Deputy Commander announcements some time later. It felt burdensome, but on some level, I was proud to have my skills recognized."

“However, that pride didn't last long. An incident occurred simultaneously with the manifestation of my second gender.”

Yuder pondered for quite some time on how to articulate the event, but his eventual words were concise.

"While discussing matters with the Commander as the Deputy, my second gender suddenly manifested. Given that it happened in a much more unexpected situation than now, the outcome was far from favorable."

Kishiar's eyes flickered ever so slightly.

"When I came to my senses, about a week had passed, and I started feeling emotions of others that I had never felt before. The Commander said he would find the reason for what happened to me... but I don't think I ever got that answer."

The reason for the uncertain tone was because he could no longer fully trust his memories from that time.

"Well, many other events transpired afterward. A horde of colossal monsters appeared in the west, causing most of the region to collapse. Many Cavalry members died or were injured and left the unit. Around the time these matters were concluding, I was nominated as the successor to the Cavalry Commander and learned what was necessary for the position."

"..."

“The death of Emperor Keilusa also occurred around that time. Crown Prince Katchian ascended the throne, and you stepped down from your Commander position.”

"Even after retreating to Peletta, it wasn't peaceful. Despite rumors swirling that you harbored rebellious intentions, you said nothing. Whether that was true or not, I still don't know. However, the assassination order issued against you was undoubtedly related to those rumors."

Yuder's narrative captured the events and emotions, laying bare the complexities of a time fraught with uncertainty and change.

Over the course of the year since Kishiar had stepped away, Emperor Katchian quietly observed Peletta. However, as rumors grew too intense to ignore, he had resorted to sending imperial knights as an indirect warning and pressure. Finally, he summoned Yuder and gave him his first secret mission.

Yuder still remembered the weight of the sword he had received from Emperor Katchian in the hidden passageway of the imperial garden that day.

"There's no need for a separate report confirming the success of your mission. Prove to me why the Cavalry should continue to exist, Commander."

Kishiar's life and the future of the Cavalry.

Between the two, Yuder chose the latter and carried out the assassination of Duke Peletta with that sword.

A relationship, brief as it was, spanning only about two years, was thus severed.

"If you've listened up to here, you'd understand that I was not particularly close to the Commander at that time. Quite the opposite, in fact."

An entity forever incomprehensible. A figure who had only brought suffering after an inexplicable connection. A person who revealed nothing.

Yet, at the same time, he was the mentor who had taught Yuder everything, the senior who had left behind the Cavalry, and the only one with whom he had ever shared a relationship.

Yuder fell silent for a long while after finishing his story.

He had tried to recount the tale as objectively as possible, but whether he succeeded, he could not be certain.

Chapter 607

'I felt more drained just from talking than I did after training for three days straight,' he thought. By the time he finished speaking, the darkness outside the window had given way to a faint light. The tea in his mouth had grown cold. Yuder murmured, weighed down by fatigue.

"Do you know why I felt the need to share this story now?"

If anyone understood what he wanted to convey, it was probably Kishiar, perhaps even better than Yuder himself.

"Is it to warn me not to become the same person as before?"

His response didn't disappoint, but it was more aggressive than Yuder had anticipated. Yuder felt the need to soften his words.

"You might know this, but even after starting the new game, I couldn't trust the Commander for a long time. Who do you think made me speak up?"

Facing the man who probably knew the answer, Yuder declared, "It was you."

It was the unwavering trust and faith he had shown first. Emotions they had never shared before. Because Kishiar had shown his honesty and desire first, Yuder felt he could reciprocate.

The biggest difference between his past life and now lay there.

Hiding his tumultuous feelings, Yuder continued, "I am, admittedly, quite ambitious. I have never lost to anyone out of sheer willpower."

Yuder's ambitions weren't directed toward money, jewels, precious swords, or greater power. They were always about his own strength, discovering more effective training methods, and ways to win in battles.

But just because his desires differed from others didn't mean they were any less intense. Yuder never gave up on what he wanted.

And now, it was time to pour that determination onto the only person who had ever truly ignited Yuder's ambition.

"This story was the secret I intended to keep until the very end, my final barrier. As you once said, since you've broken down all my walls, shouldn't I do the same?"

"..."

"I've laid myself bare, so now, Commander, show me your 'real' self."

Yuder had seen enough of Kishiar's flaws. He had witnessed the pain the man hid, his ruthless and secretive side, and even the moments when he reached the limits of his patience.

That's why Yuder wanted all of Kishiar. He believed he had every right to know the very core of the man.

'Of course, it won't be easy.'

He didn't expect to get everything he wanted right away. But that was okay.

"I'm not asking for everything right now. Just as you did, I'll wait until I break down all the barriers to get what I want."

Yuder curled his lips into a smile. It was an awkward and peculiar expression, but Kishiar couldn't take his eyes off him.

"I wish you had just scolded me. This feels even worse."

A bitter smile appeared on the man's face.

"If you had asked for the most beautiful and perfect parts of me, I would have given them to you. But you want the opposite. What am I to do?"

"That's why I said I'd wait. I'm not very confident in this area, but once I learn something, I never forget. I'll do my best."

Kishiar covered his eyes with his hand, letting out a long sigh. The youthful vigor that once adorned his face through the use of magic had now been replaced by a fleeting expression of deep fatigue and anxiety.

Yuder realized that he had finally achieved what he had longed for.

"...That's all I wanted to say. If you wish to punish me now, I will accept it graciously."

"You asked for everything from me just a moment ago, and now you're asking for punishment."

"Well, that was then and this is now."

Yuder had pondered the reaction he would receive after confessing to the killing of Kishiar in a past life.

What would the man say upon learning the truth?

Back when Yuder knew little about him, he had assumed he would be banished and met with negative reactions. As a result, Yuder had thought it best to keep this secret for the sake of what lay ahead. However, after getting to know him and developing feelings for him, even the thought of revealing the truth made Yuder's blood run cold and his chest tighten with anxiety.

But what about now?

Having revealed everything, Yuder felt an eerie sense of emptiness and calm within. The only thing that filled that void was not a whirlwind of agony, but his own resolve towards Kishiar.

"...If someone has to take responsibility, it should be the person who died in the previous life, stepping forward himself."

As he looked into Yuder's determined eyes, Kishiar finally murmured,

"But from my perspective, even if he had been here, he probably wouldn't have sought to punish you. Especially speaking from my current position, where nothing has yet happened."

"That is..."

"Do you think I'm speaking too lightly without fully understanding? That's not the case."

Kishiar calmly replied, as if reading Yuder's inner thoughts.

"Think about it. If, as you said, the vessel was already cracked at the time of the Red Stone retrieval mission, then Kishiar from back then was in a condition where his death at any moment wouldn't have been surprising. Honestly, it's more shocking that he even survived for two more years. Being assassinated, at least, would have left a body behind, so in a way, that could be seen as a better fate. Even if I didn't know, I would probably have felt the same."

His words seemed cold for talking about his own past life, but there was no wavering in Kishiar's gaze.

"So, don't ever speak of it again. Just make sure the same thing doesn't happen twice."

His words implied that he wouldn't hold Yuder responsible for his death in the past life.

Yuder felt a weight lift from his tense shoulders and back.

"...Aren't you upset, though?"

The Kishiar from his past life had faced a harsh failure. A failure that was nothing short of disastrous when compared to Yuder's own. It was hard to believe that he would be unfazed by losing everything and dying.

"Yes, I am upset. But not because of something that happened in a life I don't even remember."

Just as Yuder was about to ask 'why then,' Kishiar spoke first.

"Wasn't it hard for you?"

"...?"

"Joining the Cavalry right after starting anew, and eventually ending up by my side. It must not have been easy."

The question seemed trivial, yet for some reason, Yuder found it difficult to respond immediately. Perhaps it was because of Kishiar's gaze.

"I never thought it was... hard."

Kishiar mused with a hint of self-reflection, "If I were in that position, I probably wouldn't have given someone like me a second chance. Not even a fraction of kindness, let alone a laugh. I would have kicked him out every time he tried any tricks."

Although he didn't physically kick anyone, Yuder felt a pang of conscience for having done similar things.

"What's wrong with the Commander?"

Kishiar confessed, albeit with a touch of self-derision, "He might look handsome, but he's actually quite sly. Even as I say this, I find myself relieved to have been given another chance, holding onto the hand I've grabbed, coveting it to the point where my head feels like it's on fire."

His voice was both soft and cool as he honestly shared his feelings.

"If I say I want to hold you even in such a situation, it would still be strange, wouldn't it?"

"There's nothing strange about it," came the assured response.

"You say that because you don't know the expression on your own face."

Yuder raised his hand to touch his face.

"...Is there something wrong with my face?"

Kishiar's eyebrows seemed to relax, and he reached out to touch Yuder's face with a smile.

"No, there's nothing wrong."

"..."

"May I come over now?"

Yuder nodded, and Kishiar moved closer, embracing him tightly. As they leaned their heads on each other's shoulders and breathed, tension melted away bit by bit, their body heat mingling and warming them both.

Finally, it felt like he had properly reconnected with Kishiar.

A soft voice resonated over Yuder's head, his eyes closed.

"It felt like a cold wind was blowing through my heart."

Though his tone was gentle, like a lullaby, the words themselves were not.

"I hated the thought of sleeping because it felt like everything would fade away, like you would disappear in that cold wind. A dulled blade is of no use, after all."

"..."

"It's funny, isn't it? I used to think being able to dull my senses was a strength, but now I don't want to be numb."

Kishiar's labored breath flowed over the shoulder he was leaning on.

"This is precisely why I kept going over it secretly, why I couldn't sleep, why I used magic tools to hide my facial expressions."

It was almost laughable.

His chest felt heavy. Yuder tightened his arms around Kishiar and lowered his head.

"I also hesitated a long time before bringing up today's conversation. Even though I admit my guilt, I was afraid to step out of the current situation. I was cowardly."

He looked so pathetic and foolish that he almost wanted to mock himself.

"If it's laughable, then my current state is even more so."

"But that means you've grown fond of me, hasn't it? That's a good thing."

"Should I return those words to you?"

"You got me there."

Daylight had fully arrived outside. Distant noises of early risers could be heard. Normally, it would be time to wake up and get moving, but Yuder signaled with his eyes, tapping on the arm that was holding him.

"Although you may have further thoughts after what I've told you today, let's continue next time. For now, go to sleep."

"I'm not sleepy. Just a little longer like this..."

"Go to sleep."

He didn't say it a third time. Yuder stood up first and helped Kishiar to his feet. With a short laugh that made his nose wrinkle, the man followed Yuder's lead into the bedroom.

Yuder laid him down and even pulled the blanket over him, then sat beside him. This reminded him of a similar moment before they had left the Great Sarain Forest.

"Am I the only one sleeping?"

"I've slept far more than you, Commander. Naturally, I should go out and train, and to prepare to leave."

"So, this is the real punishment."

Even though he said that, Kishiar closed his eyes obediently. He was holding Yuder's hand.

His breathing gradually became even, but Yuder did not let go of his hand and continued to watch him. Though he said he would leave soon, he couldn't let his guard down, as Kishiar was particularly good at deception.

As he looked down, the conversation they had shared began to slowly circle in his mind. The words that lingered the longest were, of course, the ones he'd heard near the end.

"Was it not difficult for you?"

Those were the only words spoken even after hearing of his own demise.

A sensation, somewhat different from before, began to constrict deep within his chest. Yuder swallowed that feeling and turned his head, catching a glimpse of his own face reflected in the glass window.

The man with black hair wore an expression of profound exhaustion, one he did not recognize.

For some reason, Yuder felt like he understood why Kishiar had spoken about his face.

Chapter 608

"Sage! Sage!"

At the Bright Palace, where the Crown Prince resides.

A young man, sprinting through the tranquil courtyard calling for the sage, was suddenly grabbed by the nape of his neck by another individual.

"What's going on, Langbarton? Have you forgotten where you are?"

"Let go, Nezo. I must see him immediately!"

"The sage is currently in a meeting with the Crown Prince. He won't be available for at least another half day. No point in rushing."

"What? Damn it..."

Hearing this, the young man, Langbarton, finally stopped in his tracks, his expression twisted in frustration. Nezo sighed and softly spoke.

"What's so urgent that you're in such a rush? Tell me first."

"Well..."

Langbarton hesitated momentarily, but then seemed to make up his mind.

"You heard about the signs of intrusion at our quarters, right?"

"Yes, what about it? Did you manage to catch the culprits?"

A few days ago, they had received a belated report of an unauthorized intrusion at the place they had been staying. Due to the tenants moving into the Crown Prince's palace and losing contact, the news had reached them quite late through someone from Diarca's side, who was officially listed as the owner.

The bold criminals, who had intruded in broad daylight, remained at large, and they suspected that Nahan was responsible.

How fortunate it was that the sage's current stay at the Crown Prince's palace was a well-kept secret from the other members of the Star of Nagran. Those who followed the sage were covertly working to locate the Nahan miscreants first.

"That's not it... what's important is something else."

"What could be more important than that?"

"I've retrieved a letter delivered there from our southern base. It arrived yesterday, and the contents are concerning. It seems like Nahan might have stolen a letter they had previously sent from there!"

"What? What are you talking about?"

Nezo widened his eyes.

"Look at this. It was written by Sera."

Langbarton pulled out a letter from his pocket and handed it to Nezo, who quickly adjusted his glasses and began to read.

Nezo's face twisted with a blend of anger and disbelief as he skimmed through the contents.

"What in the world..."

The letter was filled with anxieties, questioning why their previous communication had been left unanswered for so long.

The atmosphere in the southern base had become increasingly tense due to the Awakeners who followed Nahan. The letter detailed the daily conflicts and how many had either wished to leave or had already left the base.

It wasn't just the southern base; the central base, although the western one was gone, was also experiencing a high rate of defections. They were even requesting assistance from the south.

'So many defectors all of a sudden. Has Nahan finally revealed his dark intentions and begun instigating this?'

That was unlikely. People who had grown tired of hiding had simply been drawn in by the recruitment of the Cavalry, but to the overly cautious eyes of Nezo and Langbarton, everything seemed to be because of that.

However, the most baffling part of the letter read, 'Given the circumstances, if the delay continues, we might have to accept the offer made by Southern merchants to protect our southern base.' Nezo was at a loss for words.

"Southern merchants? Who the hell are these people?"

"I'm not sure either. After seeing the mention of a previous letter, I only then realized that there must have been a message we never received," said Langbarton, a hint of concern tingeing his voice.

"So the intruders rummaging through our quarters didn't just take petty items; they also intercepted our correspondence," Nezo mused, looking up from the letter he had been inspecting.

"Exactly. That's why we need to reply immediately. We'll have to change the route for our letters and secure our base as well."

Langbarton was visibly anxious. Nezo, who had been coldly scrutinizing the letter, finally spoke. "Then let's draft a letter and send it ourselves."

"Um? But..."

"You know as well as I do how busy the sage is right now. Didn't you hear that the monstrous assistant of the Cavalry Commander went west just yesterday?"

"Yes, I heard he ferreted out all the initial contacts that Baron Renbow had inserted in the west like a ghost," Langbarton replied, his face tinged with a shiver.

"Given that the sage couldn't even get a proper night's sleep last night while trying to reach out to them, and today he's worn out from attending to the emotional needs of the overburdened Crown Prince, he won't have time for such trivial matters."

"That's... true."

"We can tell him tonight after we've sent it. He'll understand the importance."

Grinding his teeth, Nezo continued, "The silver lining is that the sage has decided to send the people he'll plant in the Cavalry to the south. Through them, our communication will be faster. We can help Duke Diarca and take care of our affairs simultaneously."

"Ah, Nezo, you're always so smart!" Langbarton's face brightened considerably.

However, just then, Nezo covered Langbarton's mouth and looked around. "Wait. Did you hear that noise just now?"

"No, what noise? I didn't hear anything."

Still uneasy, Nezo cautiously scanned the surroundings before returning. "We shouldn't talk about such dangerous matters outside. Let's discuss it inside next time."

"People around here already shun us. They don't pay attention to what we're saying."

"Even so, we need to be cautious."

After the two had vanished, muffling their footsteps, a figure emerged from the shadowy corner that Nezo hadn't fully checked.

"So, those conmen are up to something, huh?" The figure, none other than Kiolle Da Diarca, grimaced as though he had just touched something filthy.

"Those bastards, besides those six, they have more lackeys elsewhere? And they're helping my father do what? Planting people in the Cavalry? Father entrusts those plans to those guys? What on earth is he thinking?"

Full of questions and indignation, Kiolle remembered something Yuder Aile had told him not long ago. The leader of the healers could potentially be a mental manipulator, so never let your guard down. And watch Duke Diarca carefully for any change in behavior.

Kiolle had thought those words ridiculous then, but after hearing these healer fellows talking about assisting both his father and the Crown Prince, an ominous feeling settled in.

"I'm worried about my father... though the Cavalry is not my concern."

However, the moment that thought crossed his mind, the small oath mark he had left on his hand activated, making his eyelids unbearably heavy.

"Ugh...!"

Staggering, Kiolle barely caught himself against the solid wall. His heart pounded, and cold sweat trickled down his face as he realized he'd almost died.

‘Damn, this cursed oath again!’

Lately, Kiolle had nearly mastered the limitations of his oath, avoiding sudden bouts of extreme drowsiness. However, there was one exception—the third clause: "Assist Yuder Aile to the best of your abilities."

‘Damn it all! What’s the standard for helping that black-haired Cavalryman that tortures me like this! Why does the power of the third clause keep getting stronger every day?’

His line of thought was both correct and incorrect. The oath's conditions depended on how helpful Kiolle himself believed he was to Yuder.

Unaware that the more he focused on Yuder and the Cavalry, even dwelling on trivial information, the stronger the power of the third condition became, Kiolle kicked the wall in frustration again today.

‘Yeah, I get it, okay? You demon!’

At that moment, the "demon" in question was calmly exchanging final farewells with his colleagues in the west, completely oblivious to being cursed.

"What? Yuder's leaving already?"

"That's too soon. The second round of tests isn't even finished yet. Stay a little longer. You look tired. Isn't the Commander still resting?"

Despite the comments about looking tired, Yuder didn't bat an eye.

"I was supposed to leave yesterday, but I ended up staying an extra day. I've seen everyone I needed to see; the rest can choose for themselves."

"Ahh..."

Though his comrades like Emun showed signs of regret, they didn't try to keep him back. They understood how busy the Commander and his assistant must be.

"Make sure you follow the new training schedule I gave you. I'll check on your progress the next time we meet."

"Yes, who would dare not to follow it? You personally designed every bit of it for the Cavalry."

As soon as the conversation shifted to training, his comrades looked somewhat pained, but ultimately replied in a playful manner. Their faces looked better than when they were in the capital.

"But Yuder, can I ask one last thing? You received a blessing from the Awakener card reader during yesterday's test observation, right? What happened with that? Was it activated?"

"Ah! I was so curious I couldn't sleep!"

"Me too!"

Amid the twinkling eyes, Yuder quietly opened his mouth.

"I don't know yet."

"What?"

"I said, I don't know."

"How can you not know? It must have activated already, right?"

"You can't really be sure. In the first round, I had a similar blessing. I saw a stone that another participant accidentally dropped bounce off above my head."

Emun interjected.

"Then what? Could it activate after a day?"

"Just because the blessings received so far have mostly shown effects within a day doesn't mean this one will too. The name of the blessing is just that—it saves you from danger once."

In his previous life, blessings from Gloe, who had far superior abilities, activated regardless of time. Though her current abilities were still not mature enough to guarantee activation within a day, it might not be the case always.

Everyone showed disappointed faces at Yuder's answer.

"Darn it... I was really curious."

"Let us know when it activates!"

"But what about Marty and Robel?"

Yuder shifted the topic by asking a question.

"Ah, you haven't greeted them yet? Marty should be at the prison reconstruction site today. Where Marty is, you'll find Robel. Would you like us to go there together?"

"I'm good."

With a concise reply, Yuder headed straight for the site where Tainu's underground prison used to be. Located right near the Western Branch building, the place still bore strong traces of the destruction wrought by Nahan and his comrades.

Although rebuilding was necessary, the site, which had held criminals, posed challenges for unrestricted access. However, since those who had destroyed the place took it upon themselves to rebuild it, all issues had been resolved.

'I heard as much... but why is there no one here now?'

Lunchtime had already passed, and Yuder entered the vacant construction site and scanned the surroundings. Invoking a minor wind spell to assist his search, he soon heard amplified murmurs coming from somewhere.

“What should we do?... In this situation...”

“...is it...”

Yuder moved in the direction of the voices. Soon, he found a group of people gathered in a corner of the construction site.

Marty and Robel were there too.

"What's going on?"

"Ahh, Sir Yuder, you're here. Well... Two of the people working here suddenly had some issues related to second gender manifestation."

Upon spotting Yuder, Robel scratched his head with a troubled expression and spoke.

Chapter 609

"What's going on?"

"Ahh, Sir Yuder, you're here. Well... Two of the people working here suddenly had some issues related to second gender manifestation."

Upon spotting Yuder, Robel scratched his head with a troubled expression and spoke.

"Not long ago, Onel started showing symptoms of fever, which appears to have been a sign of a second gender manifestation. Today, he finally manifested, and collapsed. Just so happened that Marsun, who is the only one here to have already undergone a second gender manifestation, was near him at the time. We don't know if Marsun was influenced by it, but he suddenly lost control, and we had to halt the construction to restrain him."

"Was there an accident?"

Robel shook his head as Yuder quickly inquired.

"No, no equipment was damaged, and no one was hurt. Both of them are currently unconscious. We've isolated them and are trying to figure out what to do next. If Marsun is just temporarily out of control, that's one thing, but if he's gone berserk, we may need the help of the Cavalry."

'At least that's something,' Yuder silently exhaled.

He glanced at the murmuring prisoners nearby. Each one wore a bracelet marking them as criminals; they had all been captured by the Cavalry.

These were the people who had once obstructed the Cavalry, killing ordinary non-Awakeners and destroying buildings. Yet now, the fire had left their eyes. In the presence of Marty, who had awakened because of their actions, none dared to even raise their heads. It was as if they were looking at someone else entirely.

'So, Robel and Marty were supervising them, as I had heard.'

Yuder had originally planned to just greet Robel and Marty and move on, but with the current unexpected situation, investigating and resolving the issue was now a priority. He took a careful look at their faces before stepping forward.

"Let me ask one thing first. Was Marsun an Alpha or an Omega?"

"Uh, let me think... I don't quite remember."

"..."

"Was it Alpha? No, was it Omega? What was it?"

As Robel, who hasn't manifested a second gender himself, furrowed his brow in an attempt to remember, the prisoners behind him made similar expressions.

It was a sharp-eyed woman at the back, who had been silent until now, that spoke up.

"I know. He was an Alpha."

"Ershi!"

"You should know what the Cavalry will do to you if you speak informally like that! You, who already..."

The other Awakeners around her whispered urgently, but Ershi simply glared darkly at Yuder and offered no other response. The prisoners were afraid Yuder might say something to her, but he remained silent.

All that came to his mind were some brief memories and information about Ershi.

Ershi, an Awakener who had once run amok, killing people recklessly while fueled by immense hatred toward certain nobles, including Baron Willhem. She had been captured, rather than killed, thanks to Ever's intervention, but she had lost most of her powers in the aftermath of her rampage.

Even in her devastated state, she had yelled and cursed at Kishiar when he came to find her. Now, the Ershi in front of him was incomparably calmer and more composed than before.

'It seems like she's in her right mind... and the effects of her rampage have mostly worn off.'

Yuder scrutinized her condition before speaking.

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"In that case, it means Onel is in the middle of an Omega manifestation."

"..."

"Robel, where is Marsun now?"

As Yuder turned his head to ask, Robel blinked and cautiously countered.

"Ah... shouldn't we check on Onel first?"

"Administering sedatives and isolating the individual for about a week should resolve the issue quickly. However, the Awakener with second gender who was standing right next to the Omega could pose more of a risk than the Omega itself."

Being close to an Awakener with a second gender who had just undergone their initial manifestation was an extremely dangerous situation for an Awakener with an opposing second gender. The strong scent that emanated from them could induce a heat period that wasn't initially in the cards, and there was no telling what they might do once they lost their reason.

He knew very well how potent that reaction could be, from his experience in his previous life.

In this life, Kishiar had managed to control himself, but not everyone could do that. Therefore, immediate confirmation was essential.

"Understood. Follow me."

Yuder promptly followed Robel and Marty. Soon, the other prisoners started trailing behind them as well. Nobody hesitated, even though staying outside might offer a brief moment of freedom or perhaps an opportunity to escape.

"We've arrived. This way and you'll soon... Sir Yuder?"

Robel, who had been kindly guiding the group into the prison, suddenly halted and turned to look at Yuder.

"What's wrong?"

Instead of responding, Yuder lightly massaged his forehead with a somewhat furrowed face.

"As I suspected. I won't proceed further."

"What?"

"It means Marsun's agitation isn't a precursor to going berserk. However, it seems that his heat period is coming soon. It's going to be potent, so do not let any Omega Awakeners enter the same building."

"How could you know that without even seeing... Ah!"

Marty gave Robel a strong jab in the ribs as he mumbled.

"Yuder is an Awakener with a second gender too."

"Ah, yes, of course. I'd forgotten that you're an Awakener with a second gender, Yuder."

The rumor that Yuder and Kishiar had deliberately spread originated in this western region. Yuder was currently the most famous Omega Awakener in the entire empire.

But, despite knowing that, Robel forgot it all as he looked at Yuder's pale, icy face. He clenched his aching side and secretly swallowed his tears.

"Is it normal for Marsun to suddenly enter heat? I've never seen this happen between Awakeners with a second gender before."

"It may not happen to everyone, but it's a definite possibility."

But that didn't make it any less dangerous.

Nothing was as perilous as a heat period suddenly being triggered. Yuder felt the invisible scent of another person pricking at his skin and nostrils and stepped back a bit. Even the slightest touch had caused a tingling sensation. It was because the scent of the Alpha Awakener was making the Omega Awakener within him wildly react, trying to reel him in like a claw.

'It's been a long time since I've felt someone else's scent so strongly.'

Compared to the scent of Kishiar that had once filled the space around him, it was weaker, but the sensation was enough for Yuder to surmise that Marsun was not in a good state.

And when everyone else went downstairs to check, that guess was confirmed.

"Marsun's body is like a furnace! He can't breathe properly, and he's not responding to his name!"

"What do we do? When other guys went through heat, they weren't this agitated. Why...?"

'As I thought, the Alphas are more critical than the Omegas. We need to calm him down quickly.'

Yuder turned toward the bewildered crowd.

"Why are you all standing still? We have no time to waste. Immediately separate the Omega Awakeners to another building. Also, both of them need to be given sedatives and sleep aids, so get those as well."

"But... another building? We're prisoners, where are you sending us?"

One of the awakened prisoners, who had been wearing a forlorn expression, cautiously asked. Others around him nodded in agreement.

"So where are these medications supposed to come from?"

The man who was trailing off silenced himself as soon as he heard Yuder's heavy sigh. Yuder turned to all of them and made his point clear once more.

"The Cavalry building next door wasn't constructed just for fun. You've been treated and have worked there so far, haven't you? What did you think that was for?"

"Uh? Well, yes, but..."

"Robel."

Ignoring the unsettled prisoners, Yuder called out to Robel.

"Yes!"

"Take the Omega Awakeners to the Cavalry building. You can get there quickly using your abilities, can't you?"

"Yes, I understand!"

"Ah, also, please bring my belongings that are there."

"Your belongings, Yuder? Alright."

Robel, capable of flying lightweight with the power of wind, nodded. Without another word, he turned and sprinted towards where Onel, identified as an Omega, was located. As he left, Ershi, who had been silent, finally spoke.

"Peter. Jim. You both follow."

"Huh?"

"You think Robel will move Onel by himself? Idiots, don't you have hands and feet? Use your abilities! Get the medications!"

"Uh... got it!"

Startled and surprised, the two men hastened to where Robel had gone. Yuder and Ershi's eyes met for a fleeting moment, but neither said anything.

"Follow me, the rest of you. We have to keep an eye on Marsun's condition until the medications arrive."

Ershi turned and made her way to where Marsun was, with the remaining prisoners reluctantly following her. Yuder and Marty were left alone on the upper floor.

"If it's an Alpha's heat period... Are you alright, Yuder? You're an Omega Awakener."

"It's alright to be this close."

He couldn't entirely leave the area, unsure of how Marsun's condition could change. It was best to remain at a distance where the influence would be minimal.

In the tense silence, Yuder looked at the control device around Marty's neck. It was the first time he had seen it properly fastened.

"You're making good use of the control device, I see."

"Yes. When I wear it, I can hardly muster any power. I've been meaning to thank you."

Marty touched the collar around her neck, adding that she liked its inconspicuous, ordinary accessory-like appearance. She cautiously opened her mouth to speak again.

"You really seem to be an extraordinary person, Yuder."

Sensing the implication behind her words, he averted his eyes, to which Marty simply smiled.

"You always make everyone realize what is most important right now."

"I haven't done anything so grand."

It was the truth. He'd merely told people to do what they should be doing. What was so extraordinary about that? But Marty just continued to smile.

"At first, people here were reluctant to work. They yelled, 'Why should we help with this construction?' and would rebel or slack off. But eventually... they started to calm down."

"..."

"We're not far from the heart of Tainu. In the course of our work, we inevitably encounter the families, friends, and neighbors of many who have been injured or killed there. And did you know? Since the last incident, there has been a significant surge in Awakeners in Tainu. Quite a few have emerged even from among the bereaved and those who suffered severe injuries."

A considerable number of those who had faced life-threatening situations in Tainu had newly Awakened. It was a circumstance similar to that of Marty.

Nahan's associates stepped outside to repair what they had destroyed and continued to observe these individuals. Since there was a Cavalry Branch right next to the prison where they were staying, they couldn't avoid hearing such news regularly.

It was unclear what they thought as they observed these individuals.

What mattered was that those once enthralled by evil had increasingly found themselves lost in thought and becoming quieter.

"Truthfully, I never thought they would change as I observed them. But lately, I've begun to understand the thinking of the Cavalry Commander who put them to work."

The one who had assigned this task to the prisoners was Kishiar. He had told Ershi that after she had paid her debt to society for a year, he would return to see if she still held the same views.

At that time, Ershi had acted as though she would never change, just like Marty had said...

"..."

Yuder lowered his head and smiled briefly.

"Uh... Sir Yuder, did you just..."

"I've brought it!"

Just then, Robel and the others rushed in, cutting short the conversation between Yuder and Marty.

"We've got sedatives and tranquilizers, all kinds! Onel is being taken care of over there, and more Cavalry members will be arriving soon!"

"Take them downstairs immediately."

"Ah, I've also brought your luggage, Sir Yuder. Here it is."

Robel handed Yuder a bag and quickly descended. The floor below became noisy.

'If only that Marsun guy would fall asleep quietly... I wonder.'

Yuder waited with a piercing gaze.

It wasn't long before Robel returned, his face sweaty and strained. The outcome was obvious.

"The medicine didn't work?"

"Yes, we gave him all the medicine we brought, but there's been no effect..."

Marty's expression darkened as well. However, Yuder calmly opened the bag he had been carrying. As he took something out, Robel looked puzzled.

"What is that?"

"It's a stabilizer specifically designed for Awakeners with a second gender, produced for testing by the Cavalry headquarters. It should be more effective for those experiencing manifestation and heat period than what he took before."

"Such a precious thing..."

Robel gulped, eyeing the small container filled with only a few pills.

"Did you bring that for yourself, Yuder?"

"It doesn't matter. The urgent matters should be dealt with first. Take it. If one doesn't work, give him all."

"But..."

Yuder's eyes narrowed slightly, signaling he wouldn't repeat himself. Robel swallowed and accepted the container.

As time passed and Robel descended again, Yuder stood still, focusing on a faint scent in the air. Meanwhile, a few more members of the Western Cavalry Branch arrived. Surprisingly, among them was a familiar face.

"...Commander."

"You promised to stay by my side until I woke up, and yet you lied."

The man with his face concealed by a robe approached with a smile.

"That's because..."

"I heard the reason. Something urgent came up."

Kishiar had cast a fleeting glance down the stairs and quickly pulled Yuder by the shoulder.

"The air isn't good here."

As he murmured, his scent flowed strongly, pushing away the other odors that filled the space. The awkward scent that seemed to be scratching at the air disappeared, and a familiar scent enveloped him. Without realizing it, a deep breath escaped him.

"We were almost done. You didn't need to come all this way..."

"How could I not? Especially at a time like this, for such a matter."

Marty, who was beside them, widened her eyes as if recognizing Kishiar. However, she said nothing and discreetly stepped aside, pretending not to notice.

Time continued to pass in the tense atmosphere. Suddenly, the scent that had been rampant from the floor below began to weaken. The once restless scent gradually faded until it was barely perceptible on the upper floor.

It was then that Robel, drenched in sweat, and the others came up. Ershi was not among them.

"Robel, where's Ershi?"

"She said she needed to check on Marsun's condition herself to be sure. She'll be up in a bit."

Responding to Marty's question, Robel reported to Yuder.

"Marsun has completely calmed down and just fell asleep again. We've used up all the medicine you gave us, though..."

"I told you that's okay."

"Yes... still... Phew. Anyway, it's all over now."

Yuder nodded, indicating that he too felt Marsun's scent had calmed. The Cavalry members wiped their sweat and patted each other's shoulders. Yuder instructed them to periodically administer sedatives and tranquilizers to ensure Marsun's condition didn't worsen.

After finishing everything, they stepped outside to see the setting sun. They had spent more time in the prison than they had thought. As Yuder turned his head, he locked eyes with Nathan Zuckerman, who was outside the prison gate with loaded horses. It seemed Kishiar hadn't just come here on a whim.

'So he came prepared to leave right away.'

"I'm going to go now. See you next time."

"Wait... are you leaving already?"

Catching onto Yuder's intention to depart, Robel expressed his surprise.

"You're leaving so soon..."

"Thank you so much for your help this time!"

Marty quickly bowed in gratitude, and Robel followed the gesture. As they were about to leave, Yuder felt someone's gaze on him. Turning, he saw Ershi, not far away, staring at him. With arms crossed, Ershi silently watched him and then spoke.

"...Just as Jim said. It seemed as if a black tail had been attached to your back since you first appeared."

"..."

"Consider Marsun's debt repaid with this."

With those words, Ershi turned away.

Chapter 610

"...A black tail?"

"Who is Jim?"

Yuder and Kishiar muttered their questions simultaneously before turning their heads. The moment their eyes met, Robel and Marty rushed over and began speaking.

"Jim is a prisoner working with Ershi! He was one of the two people who accompanied me earlier to the Cavalry building to help move Onel..."

"I heard he has the ability to spot other people's weaknesses and attack accordingly. I suspect Ershi mentioned it in relation to that."

Yuder quickly sorted through the torrent of words in his mind.

'Now that I hear it, I do remember. Ershi had specifically called Jim and Peter to go help Robel. So, is it that Jim observed me and reported it to Ershi?'

According to the two, Jim's specific ability seemed more akin to scrutinizing another person's state and identifying anything out of the ordinary.

That 'out of the ordinary' range was surprisingly broad; sometimes Jim could pinpoint a comrade's pain point and other times identify invisible abilities that other Awakeners had used. Yuder roughly guessed what Ershi had been getting at.

'They often say a black tail sticks to someone when they're being secretly trailed. So that means...'

"Someone has been using tracking abilities to discreetly target us," Kishiar voiced Yuder's thoughts precisely.

Jim had claimed to have seen a black tail attached to Yuder from the first time they met. That suggested there had already been tracking in place before he entered the underground dungeon.

'It didn't happen in the East, so it must have been in the West. There are only two possibilities for that.'

Either a traitor existed among the comrades in the Western Branch, or one of the recent test candidates had done something. However, Yuder considered the likelihood of a traitor among his comrades to be extremely low.

'None of the members in the division have tracking-related abilities.'

If they were to pull something like this off, they would have needed external help. And being able to do such a bold act without catching Yuder's eye from within was frankly unbelievable.

An internal traitor would more likely attempt assassination, which is faster and simpler. Therefore, the most probable person to have discreetly tailed Yuder was likely among the numerous Western test candidates.

'During the test, so many energies were erupting everywhere that even I couldn't keep track of them all... One lucky individual could've taken advantage of that to attach a tail.'

Reaching his conclusion, Yuder lifted his head. His dark eyes flickered like those of a predator.

"Considering the enemy hasn't revealed themselves despite tagging us, they must have been waiting for our numbers to dwindle before making a move. However, now that we're aware of this, things have turned out quite well."

Thanks to Gloe's blessing, their departure was delayed by a day, disrupting their original schedule. That allowed for today's events to unfold during their visit to the underground dungeon.

It was fortunate that, of all places, someone with the ability to see the tail attached to Yuder was here. And it was lucky that Ershi, who knew this information, chose to share it as a form of payment for saving a comrade.

'Could this have been the blessing meant to protect me?'

Emun had received a blessing to ward off falling stones from above his head, but not all blessings manifested in such ways. Yuder momentarily pushed aside thoughts of the unknown blessing's power and glanced around the exceptionally tranquil street as usual.

"There's no need to make a big deal here. I think it would be best to go out and see their faces ourselves," he suggested.

"Agreed. Let's do that," Kishiar complied, his face suggesting he had already anticipated Yuder's conclusion. They immediately mounted their horses and headed to where Nathan Zuckerman was waiting. Before leaving, Kishiar called over Robel and Marty, asking them to deliver a message to Emun, the Western Branch Leader.

"Find out the current location of those who ran away without notice just before the second test and those Yuder had directly witnessed. Tell them to chase after any suspicious individuals. Keep the frequency of our contact as before."

"Understood. We will relay your message!"

"Leave it to us."

Yuder quickly pulled the reins as he caught a fleeting glimpse of the two departing figures. No sooner had their trio of horses exited Tainu, than shadowy figures in a secluded inn in Tainu started to stir.

"The Black Monster and his group have finally left Tainu! There are three of them!"

"Good. Remember the advice we received yesterday from the sage serving under Baron Renbow. Wait as long as possible without being detected, and follow them carefully after sunset."

As Yuder and Kishiar had suspected, they were all individuals who had either been eliminated by Yuder during the second test or had opted out, fearing their identities had been exposed. Not a hint of anxiety could be seen in the eyes of these dozen or so menacing figures.

Among them was Seeker, an Awakener whom Yuder had personally eliminated during the second exam.

"That damned monster. He'll soon find out that breaking your neck and dying in the harsh mountains of the West isn't uncommon."

Groups of suspicious individuals dispersed, each heading out of different city gates of Tainu.

The oblivious city remained as peaceful as ever.

...

"We'll head to a small village called Pofuan first, where Crown Prince Katchian had refined mushrooms," Kishiar informed as he effortlessly led the way through the dark forest. Horses were unsuitable for the dark forest, so they were all walking.

However, due to their abilities far surpassing average humans, their walking speed was exceptionally fast.

"We'll have to veer off this path and go through the Guanamar Mountains. If our attackers are trailing us, it might be wise to slow down near the entrance and wait for them," Kishiar added.

"A spot where the enemy would lower their guard, thinking they have the advantage. A perfect place for an ambush," Yuder mumbled, prompting a smile from Kishiar.

"Exactly, very textbook. But don't offer to act as a decoy or anything of that sort."

Yuder paused, exactly on the verge of suggesting just that.

"Why? I'm the one being chased; it makes sense for me to cause the distraction."

"The scent emanating from you has intensified since we left Tainu. Didn't you notice?"

Yuder's eyes twitched. He raised his hand and sniffed his palm but couldn't discern any difference.

"...I can't tell," he admitted.

"If you're not aware of it yourself, then for now, it's probably fine. But it's still better to be cautious. If bait is needed, I'll volunteer."

"Really?"

"Ever since I've found out how much my adjutant and assistant were concerned about me, to the point of pausing their work, I ought to demonstrate my own resilience to ease their worries."

"..."

A chilling silence settled in the air following Kishiar's softly muttered words. Yuder's eyes swiftly darted, and upon meeting Nathan Zuckerman's gaze, the man subtly exhaled.

Through this, Yuder was certain that during his absence, Kishiar, who had woken up from sleep, had heard from Nathan Zuckerman on whatever had transpired between the loyal knight and the assistant.

It didn't seem that Yuder was surprised or disappointed, but the fact that Kishiar would willingly take on the most dangerous task just to prove 'there's no need to worry about me,' was breathtakingly like him.

"Let's use our strength wisely, extract information after capturing them, and then bury their faces in the ground—arrange them in a way that makes it easier for those in the base to pick them up."

"Understood."

Hearing the somber replies from Nathan and Yuder, Kishiar broke into a smile.

At that moment, an incongruous twinge of unease briefly fluttered within Yuder's chest and then disappeared.

Yuder thought that Kishiar's mood would have been somewhat subdued, given the fact that his hidden past had been exposed and he now knew how he died in his previous life.

But look at that face. Not a shadow of what Yuder had expected was there. Rather, Kishiar's face seemed more radiant, more relaxed than before.

This wasn't Kishiar pretending that nothing had happened. To Yuder, it felt quite the opposite.

The crimson eyes that glanced at Yuder while uttering 'to ease their worries' conveyed a silent message, clear in their intent—'there's no need to worry about me due to yesterday's events.'

How could Yuder argue against that?

Kishiar was the type of person who emitted an unexpected light, even when one would expect him to be at his darkest. And because of that, Yuder found himself once again without regret for yesterday's decision.

"The sounds are getting closer."

Finally, they reached the mountain's entrance. Even without Nathan Zuckerman's words, Yuder had already sensed the presence of approaching humans through the wind.

"There are eighteen people in total. Some of them are moving rather quickly. Perhaps they possess speed-enhancing abilities."

Kishiar voiced much more detailed information than Nathan Zuckerman had. There wasn't a hint of tension in his voice.

"Their abilities will be hampered in terrains with many obstacles. Using the mountain's features, we can capture them quickly."

"Good to know. Thank you. Alright, prepare yourselves. They'll be here soon."

With a brief expression of gratitude for Yuder's information, Kishiar raised his hand to signal.

Almost immediately, several shadows, like flashes of light, swooped down and landed with a thud. They were carrying comrades on their backs, and one of them precisely pinpointed Yuder's location and shouted,

"Over there!"

"Finally, we meet again! You monster of the Cavalry."

"Who are you? How did you follow me?"

Pretending to not know what you already do is a difficult task. Thankfully, the darkness veiled any awkwardness, and the enemies chuckled, obliging with an answer.

"You're surprised to see an Awakener with tracking skills as exceptional as mine, aren't you? Do you have any idea how much trouble I went through to set up this trap? You could've died quickly if I had just dealt with you then and there. Now, because of your trivial schemes, remember that you'll die in even more pain and at a later time."

"Do you think you'll tell me who sent you?"

"Of course not. What would a man about to die do with that information?"

"Exactly. It doesn't matter, as I'll find out soon enough. Now, one last question."

"Find out soon? Are you insane? What are you talking about?"

"Seems like you're too scared to think straight."

At Yuder's composed demeanor, the enemies let out incredulous laughs. Even as they did, more of their comrades, who had arrived a bit late, were steadily joining them.

Regardless, Yuder spoke unwaveringly.

"Is there anyone here willing to surrender and say something nice? Come out and kneel within the count of three, and I'll spare just that one person."