

## Turning 81

### Chapter 81

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

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

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

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

"We honestly didn't."

"How much of our conversation did you overhear?"

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

"He recognized the face?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then...!"

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

"Co, ugh!"

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

"Paviel...! Urgh!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That does sound challenging."

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

"What are you looking for?"

"A stone to launch."

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

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

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

"I guess you're not joking."

"I don't do pointless things."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did you kill them?"

"They're only unconscious."

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

'Nothing much of note here.'

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

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

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

"That's right."

"It seems we have figured it out now."