

Turning 91

Turning

Chapter 91

Devran, who should have been dead to atone for all his sins, couldn't be allowed to live. The same was true for the people of the Apeto family who had joined hands with him and orchestrated all these events. If it were revealed that Zakail had joined hands with them to seize the Lordship, he could never be forgiven.

Even though he hadn't yet inherited the Lordship, with the success of everything right before his eyes, he didn't anticipate such a turn of events. Although his mind was reeling, only the thought of escaping by any means necessary propelled Zakail to act unabashedly.

"How dare you plot in front of me, the Lord of Hartan? Escape? Report? This is absurd. I will contact His Grace, the Duke of Peletta, your immediate master, right away. I will ask him to grant me permission to execute the person who killed my father and sister and is now roaming around with a calm face...!"

"Did I kill the Lord and the others?"

The one who responded to Zakail's words was Devran. He couldn't help but let out a genuine laugh, as if the suggestion was absurd. However, the laughter that burst from his face, covered in bruises and wounds, looked monstrous, causing Zakail to involuntarily recoil in fear.

"So... so, didn't you! By starting a great fire!"

"Why would I?"

Devran asked back with a twisted smile. His eyes were full of hatred, but his voice was eerily calm, making Zakail shiver even more.

"What?"

"Why would I do that, huh? No matter how much I think about it, there's no reason, right? I left my hometown, joined the Cavalry, received a holy order from the emperor himself, and made a lot of money. I was on the path to success. Why would I risk all that? Doesn't that seem absurd to you, too?"

"How should I know? People like you get a little power and start getting ideas above their station, and perhaps in your arrogance, you started the fire! Because of you, I didn't even hear my father's and sister's last words!"

"So, you're blaming me with lies until the very end."

"So, are you saying that I, who wasn't in Hartan at that time, started the fire?"

"Ha, that's a good point. Let's discuss that, shall we?"

Looking into Devran's piercing eyes, Zakail managed to keep his unease at bay.

'What's this? Does he have some kind of proof? No. These guys don't know anything yet. I left no solid evidence that I was in league with the Apeto family. Even if they heard something when they were caught, words alone can't serve as evidence.'

As Zakail rolled his eyes, Devran opened his mouth.

"The guys who captured me grumbled that taking over a small place like Hartan wouldn't mean much and that they'd done too much for what they got. They even said that without me as a payoff, the deal wouldn't have been worthwhile. That means someone joined hands with them, took Hartan, and handed me over as compensation. Who else could be the culprit if not you, Zakail Hartan, considering the Lord and the heir, Zupiel, have passed?"

"..."

"Or could it be Zachlis, who has already received his knighthood and started a new life? None of them had any reason to do so. But you, Zakail Hartan, you had a reason! Can you swear before God that you didn't commit all these atrocities just to become the Lord of Hartan?"

Devran's resonant voice was so loud that even the guards standing far away could easily hear their conversation. Zakail gritted his teeth as he heard the murmuring voices from afar.

"After the fire, you didn't listen to a word I said. You immediately framed me as the culprit, locked me in prison, then buried me alive in front of the Rock of Death, didn't you?" Devran accused.

"No!"

Zakail yelled, his body convulsing as if in a seizure. But no matter how much he struggled, the black shadow clone that firmly held him didn't so much as flinch.

"I heard that you had committed suicide in prison, so I simply ordered you to be buried quietly!"

"Whom did you tell this to?"

The one who retorted to Zakail was a handsome man with auburn hair and striking features. The man in a well-fitted black uniform looked down at Zakail with eyes sparkling with amusement as he asked again.

"To whom did you give this order, Zakail? If we can find this person, the truth will be revealed. Right, Devran?"

"Right. I couldn't know who took me that day as I was hooded, unable to see."

'You, you brats.'

Zakail suddenly realized that he had fallen into a trap. Of course, he never gave such an order. The ones who had taken Devran from the prison, buried him, and then dug him up again, were the people from the Apeto family who had disguised themselves as hunters and hidden after negotiating everything in advance with Zakail.

Zakail had personally opened the door leading to the prison so that they could fulfill their purpose quietly under the cover of the pre-dawn darkness without anyone noticing.

To divert the attention of his older brother Zachlis, who came rushing upon hearing the news of their father and sister's death, and the village people, he spent all day preparing for the funeral in the back hill, purposely dragging out the time.

As he expected, no one cared about the missing Devran. They all believed that Devran had killed his family and set fire to the castle.

Who could suspect that Zakail, who was faithfully playing the naive youngest son who knew nothing, was lying? Zachlis, busy with knightly duties, was shell-shocked upon hearing the news of his lover's death and was spaced out throughout the funeral.

Although he had said that he would deal with inheritance matters when he returned to the Knights Order, Zakail didn't doubt that his brother would not desire to inherit the title of lord of the village.

Aside from the fact that the promising future of a knight was brighter than the petty lordship of a small village, he calculated that his overly sentimental brother wouldn't want to return to the village where his lover died.

If that happened, Zakail would have become the lord as planned, gaining the protection of Apeto instead of the Diarca family, who hadn't done anything for him, and would have grown stronger. He had big dreams of starting as the insignificant youngest son of a small village lord and ultimately becoming the winner in the east.

Zakail bit his lower lip hard enough to bleed as he thought about that dream. He couldn't afford to be tripped up here because of those commoners.

'Let's not interfere. Getting angry won't benefit me. Bowing my head to those commoners is humiliating, but I need to reassure them and survive.'

"I really can't remember who I gave such an order to, as there wasn't enough context."

"You're only saying that now...!"

"Father and older brother are gone. Do you think there would be any danger if it were you? Yes, perhaps. Who knows if those men who claimed to have captured you had deceived me and taken you instead. Right?"

"What?"

Zakail managed to force a smile to match Devran's brazenness.

"Listen, I'm not sure who planted this ludicrous idea in your head, but it wasn't me who captured you. Think about it. I'm a victim too. All I did was order a proper burial upon hearing news of your death, and here we are. Shouldn't vengeance be first sought from those who captured you? Right?"

"..."

"Free me now. If you do, I will forgive all the insolence you have shown me and, as the current representative of the lord of Hartan, I will happily assist you. I'll contact the capital to help find the real culprit. Persisting in hounding me in this manner won't do you any good."

Devran, and everyone else present, were taken aback by Zakail, who was trying to persuade people with sheer audacity despite having no evidence. His audacity was truly formidable.

'He probably won't admit anything without evidence. I suppose I should just do what I need to do before he can further manipulate the situation.'

"Devran. We need to send a letter, let's return to the castle for now."

"Can't we just kill him?"

Despite facing his mortal enemy, Devran, who was unable to lift a finger, muttered with a scowl. At Devran's grumbling, Zakail visibly shrank back, holding his breath.

"Did Yuder say it was okay?"

"No."

"Then don't."

After saying this, Gakane approached Devran and whispered just loudly enough for him to hear.

"When Yuder finishes his work and comes back, that guy's done for. You don't need to soil your hands. Our leader will take care of it. So, bear with it for a little longer. For the sake of your family."

"...All right."

At the mention of his family, Devran, whose face had softened, subdued his fiery temper and exhaled. They took Zakail, who they had apprehended, and returned to Hartan Castle.

The villagers, seeing Zakail caught by the shadow clone and lifted up, wore expressions as though they were about to faint, but were even more surprised when they saw Devran and his family who had returned alive.

"What on earth happened? I thought he was dead?"

"Considering Lord Zakail has been captured, it seems..."

"Goodness, what in the world is happening!"

And their confusion peaked when they entered the castle and came face-to-face with a terrified-looking elderly attendant.

"Lo, Lord Zakail! Not long ago, Lord Za, Za, Zachlis had returned and was waiting...but...what on earth...."

"Zachlis is here?"

On behalf of Zakail, who was gagged by the shadow clone, Devran shouted out loud.

"That's good. Where is he now?"

"In, in, in the parlor..."

"Let's go."

They all rushed to the parlor. The same parlor where, this morning, Yuder and his colleagues had devoured a plethora of food, much to Zakail's annoyance, now had a man dressed in silver armor anxiously pacing.

The man, who had a similar appearance to Zakail but seemed much kinder, was startled by the sudden influx of people. However, upon noticing Devran and Dermilla behind him, his eyes widened in shock.

Turning

Chapter 92

"My goodness! Dermilla!"

"Zachlis!"

As though no one else existed, the man who arrived breathlessly embraced Devran's sister, weeping loudly. Even Devran, who was about to shout at him, couldn't stop their momentum.

"Dermilla! Dermilla! Is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me."

"I can't believe it, by the gods. After hearing that you were dead, I, I couldn't... Oh, thank the gods!"

After a long bout of sobbing in each other's arms, Zachlis Hartan finally calmed down enough to engage in conversation.

"I, I'm sorry everyone. The shock of this... miracle... So, what exactly has happened? Who are you all?"

"Do you not remember me, Sir Zachlis?"

At Devran's sarcastic query, Zachlis quickly shook his head.

"No, not you. I remember you, Devran. What in the world happened? Why is Zakail in this state?"

Devran, who was still holding his sister's hand and whose eyes were red from crying, gave Zachlis an indescribable look. Gakane thought it would be better if he took over.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir Zachlis Hartan."

"Yes, I am Zachlis Hartan."

"I am Gakane Bolunwald, a Cavalry under Duke Peletta, assigned to investigate Devran Hartude's disappearance. If I may ask, I heard you were to return a few days later due to some business with your order. It appears you've returned earlier than expected?"

"Well, that's...actually, I received a letter during a funeral yesterday about an urgent matter, but I ran into a colleague in a village this morning who told me there was no such issue. He suggested that there might have been a mistake in delivering the command. So, I immediately returned to the village."

At those words, both Gakane and Devran's gazes simultaneously turned towards Zakail. Zakail had been avoiding their gazes and showing a hardened face since seeing his brother.

"Oh, what to do. You wanted to chase Sir Zachlis away for a long time and kill us all in the meantime, but it didn't go as planned, did it?"

"..."

"What do you mean?"

Zachlis frowned, glancing back and forth between Devran and his brother.

"What did Zakail do? Is it related to the news that Devran killed his family and committed suicide?"

Zachlis was not as clueless as expected for a knight. Gakane glanced at Devran and slowly began to speak.

"Please listen carefully to what I am about to tell you."

Although there didn't seem to be much affection among the family members, it would still be a shock to Zachlis, being Zakail's brother.

Ignoring Zakail who was struggling against the shadow spirit restraining him, Gakane calmly began to explain.

"We believe that Zakail is involved in all of these incidents. The reasons are..."

As Gakane narrated, Devran, his younger sister, and the Awakeners each contributed, filling in the gaps in the story.

At first, Zachlis wore an expression of disbelief, utterly shocked. But as the story came to an end, he looked at everyone with a cool and collected gaze.

"...and so we have joined forces and returned here. That is all."

"I see. Understood."

A long sigh slipped through Zachlis' lips. He slowly took in the sight of his lover's tear-stained face, the wounded Devran, and Gakane and Jimmy in their black uniforms. His gaze finally settled on Zakail, who looked worn out, as if he had given up on everything, and stared back with a dreadful glare.

"Could we release Zakail for a moment? It seems we need to hear his side of the story."

"More of this...!"

Gakane raised his hand to quiet the increasingly agitated Devran and nodded in understanding.

"Alright. But, understand this—we won't entirely free him because he might try to escape. We will only release his mouth."

"That's fine."

To Gakane's eyes, Zachlis already seemed to believe their story was true. As the shadow clone that was covering Zakail's mouth slowly lowered its hand, Zachlis moved closer to him.

"Brother, you don't actually believe their words, do you?"

"Zakail."

Zakail looked at his elder brother who had just called his name and forced a pale smile onto his face. But the smile was oddly twisted, as if he was struggling to control his facial muscles, making him look even more strange.

"It's all lies. You know I can't do anything. How could I betray Father and Sister? They're targeting me and making up stories!"

"...."

"If I were to join hands, who would I do it with? This is absurd. As you know, I'm not interested in the lord's position. I'll give it all to you. Then it'll be fine, right? You trust me, don't you?"

"Zakail."

Zachlis called his brother's name again. For the first time, Zakail realized his elder brother, whose eyes he always thought were filled with pointless dreams and annoyance, could look so cold.

"Enough with the lies."

A chill ran down Zakail's spine.

"Don't tell me you thought your strange behavior over the past year had gone unnoticed by our family."

"...What?"

"You've always had the most greed among us brothers, but never put in the effort. Even when Father worked hard to pave a path for you to become a scholar, you threw away the opportunity and started mingling with suspicious figures a year ago. How should we have interpreted that?"

Zakail was so surprised he unintentionally opened his mouth.

"...Wha, what are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that Father hastened the inheritance of the lordship to our sister because of you. If we had left you to your devices, you would certainly have dragged other powers into our territory, putting us all in danger."

Zachlis sighed and looked down at his younger brother.

"But it seems it was too late. I had no idea you would involve my lover to satisfy your greed. Quite impressive, really. You precisely knew what kind of action would make me lose my senses and you acted on it."

"No, brother. That's not it. Listen to me! Are you really going to cast out your own brother based on these baseless stories and being blinded by a commoner lover?"

"Zakail. Her name is Dermilla. No... Now, having taken on Devran's last name, she is Dermilla Hartude."

"What does that matter now!"

"It's far more important than my brother who tried to kill my lover and sent me a fake letter to drive me away."

Zachlis pulled out a letter from his chest.

"If this letter wasn't truly sent from the Knights, we need to find the culprit, don't we? It seems quite interesting if we bring those guys who claimed to have captured and tortured Devran."

"...I didn't send it."

"Do you think they will say the same? If you had no interest in the lordship, you must first explain why as soon as I returned to this castle, many servants spoke exactly the opposite of you. They were convinced that you, Zakail, would inherit the lordship."

Only then did Zakail's face contort violently.

"...That's... just the stupid commoners babbling!"

"Oh? Then I suppose it's fine if I take the lordship."

"What? But, you are in the Knights..."

"If I can be by Dermilla's side, I don't care where I am. It might be better to inherit the lordship, marry her, and send you away."

"Ha...haha. That's a lie, right...?"

Zakail managed a weak smile as he studied his brother's face. But there was no sign of jest in Zachlis's cold gaze.

'No, it's not true. He's lying to shake me up. My brother, how could he leave the Knights and accept a small town's lordship. That can't be. It's not true.'

But if Zachlis truly said he would become the lord of Hartan, there was no power anywhere that could overturn that. Zakail knew this too well, and despite his self-comforting words, he couldn't dispel his anxiety.

The long-standing tradition from the east was stronger than law. Even the people of Apeto couldn't overturn it. Who could dare oppose an eldest son, even one year older, inheriting his father's estate?

Zakail saw his wide dreams, which he thought were spread out before him, collapse in an instant. All his plans started from becoming the lord of Hartan. What if he couldn't secure the lordship of Hartan?

Would anyone give a new opportunity to him, who would simply be the incompetent youngest son of a noble family?

"No, it's not true. It's not true!"

Zakail shook his head and writhed.

"It's not what you really meant, right? Right? Brother, you said you're fine as long as you have her. She came back alive, so why are you doing this to me! Don't I deserve any pity...! Uh...!"

Gakane had stopped Zakail's mouth around that point, so his yell was quickly stifled into a groan. Zachlis, who was watching his brother reveal his greedy gaze and struggle in desperation, sighed and turned his back.

"Thank you."

"Do you wish to not speak further?"

"Well, as you can see, there's nothing more to hear. The circumstances of everything are so clear."

There was no trace of sympathy for his brother in Zachlis's eyes. He brushed back his hair with a slightly tired face.

Turning

Chapter 93

"I have a rough idea of whom my brother might have sided with. The Apeto Duchy has been trying to expand its power in the east these days."

Upon hearing this, Gakane glanced slightly towards Devran. He could see Devran nodding, signifying his agreement with Zachlis's assessment.

"I also heard that name when I was captured."

"I see. Apeto..."

'Could those that Yuder is currently facing also be of this family?' Gakane didn't know much about the Apeto Duchy, but he decided to include the name in the letter he would send to Kishiar.

"I am truly sorry for failing to resolve the troubles within our household in a timely manner, causing many people to commit irreversible sins. Especially you, Devran, I have nothing to say."

When Zachlis made an apologetic knightly salute, not just Devran, but all the commoner Awakeners were taken aback. They hadn't expected him to go so far.

"Well... Zachlis, you didn't sell me out."

"Still, your father and Dermilla could have died. Had I been here, such a thing wouldn't have happened...."

Seeing him apologize so formally left Devran no room to act coldly towards him. Devran sighed heavily, glanced at his younger sister standing behind him, and lowered his head.

"Hasn't Lord Zachlis also lost family members? It's alright. My family and I are all still alive."

From what Gakane could see, Zachlis seemed more upset about the injuries inflicted upon his lover and her family than the death of his own.

It wasn't surprising that familial love wasn't deep in most noble families, but it was clear that his feelings towards Dermilla were sincere.

"Lord Zachlis, may we borrow a messenger bird for a moment? I believe we need to write a report to our Commander immediately."

"Of course. I need to contact the knight's order as well. I suspect I'll be here for a while."

Zachlis declared that he would keep Zakail locked in his room until this matter was settled. At his command, servants entered the reception room with anxious expressions and escorted Zakail, who had been freed from the shadow clone, out of the room.

Zakail was led away, looking half dazed, as if he believed that his brother might actually accept the position of Lord of Hartan.

"Devran, let's go up and write a letter to the Commander. Jimmy, take good care of everyone here, make sure nothing happens."

"Will do."

Jimmy's face was full of resolve as he gripped the hilt of the sword on his waist. If it had been earlier, his stance would have been seen as cute, a spectacle for laughter, but no one laughed after seeing the sword aura Jimmy exuded.

Following Zachlis's guidance, Gakane borrowed a messenger bird that only those working at the Hartan lord's castle could use. He tried to write the letter as briefly as possible, combining what Devran said and what he had found out, but there was so much to cover that it took longer than expected.

"It's a bit of a waste. It would've been nice if Kanna was here."

"Huh? Kanna? Ah, the deputy commander of Jung Division?"

When Gakane murmured, stopping his letter-writing for a moment as a thought occurred to him, Devran looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Ah, the ability to read the information contained in objects would have been a big help if I had it here. If Kanna had seen Lord Zachlis's letter, we would have immediately known who wrote it, and we would have known sooner where you were taken. It was a bit tricky to get information since the people of this village wouldn't speak."

At first, he thought it was just a small incident, but he didn't expect it to grow so unexpectedly. Who would have thought that the disappearance of Devran before coming here would involve a surprising group like the Apeto Duchy?

'This might become bigger than I thought.'

But, having accomplished the original objective of finding Devran and keeping him safe, their task here was done. If things escalated further, Gakane knew it was to be left to the Commander, Kishiar.

'I wonder if Yuder will be okay on his own against the people of the Apeto Duchy... especially when he's alone with the bandit leader. Even knowing he's strong, I'm suddenly worried.'

Gakane watched the flying messenger bird carrying the letter until it completely disappeared from sight, and then turned.

"Let's go, Devran."

"Are we leaving immediately as planned?"

"We have to."

"Hmm..."

Gakane tilted his head at the lukewarm low hum from Devran.

"What's the matter? Is there something bothering you?"

"Well... the reason we wanted to escape here was because we thought Zakail would be alone. But now that Lord Zachlis is here and the situation has changed... there's no need to immediately leave with the injured, is there?"

Devran suggested that it might be more comfortable for them to join Yuder here. Gakane couldn't help but consider this for a moment.

"I'm fine with these injuries, but there are others who need proper care..."

'He's got a point.'

If they left, Zachlis would have to monitor Zakail alone, and if anything happened to Yuder, they wouldn't be able to rush to his aid immediately. Gakane pondered for a moment before responding.

"Alright, we'll stay here just for tonight, have a proper meal, and..."

"Gakane, Devran!"

Just then, the door burst open with the sound of hurried footsteps from outside. An excited Jimmy rushed in and gestured at Gakane and Devran.

"Come out quickly. There's another huge fire in the mountains!"

"What?"

"It's a fire that broke out much further than before. I think Yuder might be..."

Before Jimmy could finish, Gakane rushed outside. The place they visited to send the messenger bird was located right under the highest roof of Hartan Castle, so as soon as they went out, the outside scenery was clearly visible.

And just as Jimmy said, in the distant mountains, an enormous pillar of fire was shooting up, as if it was trying to pierce the sky.

"With that size... everyone in this area must have seen it."

Devran, who had followed Gakane, murmured in astonishment at the sight of the fire.

"Devran, could you make a fire that big?"

"No. The biggest fire I can make is about the size of the one from earlier. That... to be honest, it's beyond imagination. Even if we gathered all the Awakeners with fire control ability from the Cavalry..."

It was Yuder. Yuder must have caused it. Gakane's intuition flared sharply.

"Yuder. What on earth is happening there...?"

When Yuder Aile stepped into the spacious chamber at the very back of the cave, the scene inside wasn't much different from what he had expected. The familiar Warden and a few of his cronies were seated in a circle, chatting idly.

"We should probably drain some energy out of that noble brat before questioning him at dawn. You handle it, No.3. And has there been any communication from headquarters yet?"

"Unless there are unforeseen issues, we should hear something by today..."

"Huh? Who's there?"

The man who had noticed Yuder and Nahan's entrance opened his mouth in surprise. Yuder raised his hand and gave a light swing before they could fully comprehend the situation.

"Argh!"

The cave was instantly thrown into disarray by a sudden whirlwind. All the people and items inside were swept into the air, frantically fluttering about. In the midst of this chaos, screams echoed throughout the cavern.

"Save me!"

"What's happening!"

Yuder watched those who were made a mess of, colliding with flying furniture within the whirlwind, for a while. Suddenly, he felt a tingling pain rising from one hand and lowered his head.

'What's this?'

But the situation was not relaxed enough to inspect it right away, so he quickly diverted his attention. When he thought he had sufficiently stirred things up, he quieted the wind. Amidst the shattered furniture and the jumbled mess of people, they dropped to the ground, groaning.

"Ahh... Ahh...!"

"My, my arm...!"

"Nahan. Gather them all together. I'll tie them up."

"Quick and simple. I suppose there might not be another in the world who could subdue this many people so easily, save for you brother."

Despite being told numerous times not to refer to him as brother, Nahan never seemed to get the hint and endlessly repeated the same thing. But there were more pressing matters than correcting him at the moment, so Yuder just scowled slightly and focused on the task at hand.

Once he had tied up all the fallen men and gathered them in one place, he counted seven in total. Among them, the Awakeners who had fought against Kiolle under the Warden's order were knocked unconscious by a blow to the back of the neck, and separately quarantined.

The Warden and his subordinates, who had watched the entire process unfold flawlessly, were petrified with fear, unable to fathom the identities of Yuder and Nahan.

"You... who the hell are you? Who sent you...!"

"That's not important."

Yuder walked towards the Warden, whose face was swollen from getting hit by the broken furniture.

"I'm short on time, so let's make this brief. Do you work for the Apeto Ducal Family?"

"...Kill us!"

Ignoring Yuder's question, the Warden shouted with his toothless mouth.

"Whoever you are, we will never talk. Just kill us!"

'So quick to ask for death.'

The sight of these men, who had not only captured innocent Awakeners to use as tools of power struggle but also attached low-quality bombs to their backs, puffing up their chests and squawking bravely after a minor beating, was absurdly amusing.

Turning

Chapter 94

Yuder watched them in silence.

If they truly thought death was better, they would never talk like they did. Those who took on dangerous missions, ready to face death if captured, typically carried poison within them or signed an oath that would explode and kill them instantly if they were caught.

'Those who neither carry poison nor sign oaths sure talk big,' Yuder thought.

Yuder had his own way of dealing with such individuals. For those without the courage to kill themselves, the best approach was to induce fear by stimulating their imagination.

As he moved to draw his sword without a word, Nahan, who had been observing Yuder's actions so far, grabbed his shoulder.

"Wait. Would you let me handle this?"

"And what will you do?"

"You're trying to make them docile, aren't you? That's my specialty. Besides, I have my own score to settle with them."

Nahan's gaze briefly landed on the boy who was hiding behind his back and then on those who were bound. Hearing Nahan's emphasis on the word 'imagination,' Yuder remembered what Nahan's power was.

'Using illusion powers for interrogation?'

Suddenly, Yuder became interested. He nodded and stepped back.

"Fine."

"I promise I'll be faster."

As Nahan stepped forward in place of Yuder, the Warden's scarred face contorted with fear and disgust.

"You... What the hell are you?"

"I am an ally and an avenger for my brother."

"Brother? Are you talking about that mute kid?"

The Warden's eyes darted nervously towards the boy hiding behind Nahan.

'Mute?'

Yuder had thought the boy was simply scared because he hadn't said a word so far, but could he actually be unable to speak? As Yuder turned his head, the boy flinched and averted his gaze.

'Hmm, I didn't mean to scare him....'

Just as Yuder was about to say something to the boy, a sudden outburst came from behind him.

"Ah, I see. I understand now. You lot came to rescue those locked-up bastards! Yes, I've heard there are madmen like you these days...ugh!"

Before he could finish his words, he suddenly screamed and fell to the side, as if he had been hit by something. The faces of those bound with him simultaneously contorted.

"Warden...?"

"Wait, wait! Don't come! What is this, what's happening! No! Ah, no, no!"

The Warden twisted and turned, screaming at the empty air, looking every which way. It seemed like he could not hear nor see anyone speaking to him.

'What's going on? There's nothing there.'

As Yuder stared at the void, he turned his gaze to Nahan who was observing the Warden in extreme terror, shrieking. Nahan was looking down at the Warden like an insignificant bug, a faint smile playing on his lips. From the small ripple of energy emanating from Nahan's fingertips, it was clear that he was using his power.

The screams didn't stop for a while. Gradually, any semblance of human emotion faded from the Warden's face.

In the end, he wet himself on the spot without even being able to utter a proper plea or moan. He was shaking, muttering into the empty air as though he were mad, the stench of urine around him. His appearance was indeed that of a madman.

"Please, please, please stop. Stop. I...I've made a mistake. Uh...ugh...aaaah!"

Everyone present, observing the grotesque scene of his twitching arms and legs and contorted face, was gripped by absolute terror. Even those who had previously faced Yuder and Nahan with some semblance of composure while being held captive could no longer meet their gaze, panting heavily with fear.

The most potent fear often comes not from personal experience, but rather from witnessing it up close and imagining that you might be next. From Yuder's perspective, Nahan seemed to understand this quite well and wielded it masterfully.

'I wonder what they were doing before this. I guess the curiosity naturally falls to the other side.'

Yuder studied Nahan's cruelly smiling eyes. What kind of illusion was this man presenting to the Warden? Although he didn't really want to know, the fact that he started to use his ability just when the Warden was about to say something irked Yuder.

'But there's something else bothering me more right now...'

Yuder covertly glanced at his own hand. Between the slightly exposed sleeves of his crossed arms, he could see his wrist turning a violet shade. Dark spots had started to creep up his hand, covering his skin above the black glove.

'I didn't think too much about using my power, but I didn't expect it to become like this.'

Until now, the appearance of spots had never been accompanied by pain, but now a needle-like tingling sensation intermittently throbbed from slightly above his elbow to his hand. Opening and closing his fist did not alleviate the pain.

'It's unfortunate I can't remove my clothes now to check how far it has spread... but if the pain corresponds to the area of the spots, it's probably just above my elbow now.'

Elbow. Yuder remembered that Kishiar had said that was the approximate limit for effective treatment. Despite the red gem Kishiar had given him to prevent the spots from spreading quickly and which he had properly kept in his pocket, this had happened.

'When the spots spread near the elbow, I started to feel mild pain. I wonder what happens if it spreads more.'

While curious, he wasn't too keen to find out. Yuder took a deep breath after clenching and unclenching his fist again.

'I should minimize my power usage from now on.'

While Yuder was examining his arm, Nahan was ruthlessly casting his illusion on others. The sight of people scattered around, bashing their own heads on the ground or breaking their own fingers while crying and groaning, was nothing short of hellish.

"That's enough now. I only need to hear answers to the questions, so let one of them regain consciousness."

"It's not enough yet."

Nahan murmured, standing in front of a man who was tearing at his own hair while crying.

"You volunteered to help. If you want to play, get out. I'm busy."

"Cold-hearted, aren't you? Alright."

Nahan gestured slightly towards a man who was collapsed at his feet, pleading for mercy and banging his head on the ground. Yuder belatedly realized this man was the Warden.

Although only a brief moment had passed, he looked as if he had aged decades. His skin, soaked with sweat and fatigue, had wrinkled, his eyes were bulging as if he was going mad, and his hair had half turned white, which all made him look even older.

"Now, answer this man's question."

"Mercy...mercy..."

'This is serious.'

Yuder had endured countless tortures in his past life and had himself taken many lives. However, this was the first time he had witnessed something that could so swiftly and decisively drive a person to madness.

Until now, he had thought of illusionary powers as less threatening, but for the first time, he began to sense a caution that they might be otherwise.

The Warden's state was indeed pitiful to an extreme.

"Apeto family's Warden. Can you hear me?"

As Yuder asked in a even more rigid and cold voice, the trembling Warden's eyes regained some focus.

"Ah... Apeto."

"Yes, you're the warden of the Apeto family, correct? Answer me."

"Ye, ye, yes."

The Warden quickly nodded his head.

"Your name. What is your name?"

"Ah, ah, Alban. Alban."

"Good, Alban. What were you doing here?"

The Warden, who had been previously defiant, threatening to kill or never speak, had all but lost his bravado. He seemed so grateful for Yuder's questioning that, like a child, he sobbed and spilled everything.

'As I thought, it wasn't much different from the conjectures I had made after listening to Devran.'

They were originally dispatched from the east to expand the power of the Apeto family. But, starting from two years ago, they also started kidnapping Awakeners, who were being ostracized in the surrounding areas, along with the mercenary Awakeners sent from the main house.

After torturing the captured ones to a certain extent to kill their spirits, they made them write an oath to work for the Apeto family and sent them to the main house, their job was done then.

"The main house. What happens to the Awakeners sent there?"

"Th, they... I'm not sure... but I've... heard... they are researched."

"Researched?"

"Th, the priests. They stay and conduct research. There are many people in the main house who are connected to the temple... The Apeto family has traditionally sent many children to the Sun God temple... So, the temple... we contact once a week... and visit... once a month... even now..."

While letting the warden's words, including the parts he hadn't asked about, flow in one ear, Yuder focused on the words 'priests' and 'research'.

"Did you hear what kind of research they are trying to conduct?"

"Th, th, th, that..."

The Warden scrunched up his face in pain and gasped for breath.

"I, I can't... but..."

"Speak."

Nahan, who was standing next to him, commanded coldly. Upon that, the Warden, who had stiffened for a moment, opened his trembling mouth with tears streaming down his face. His eyes rolled around like a madman's.

"Aaah. They're trying to... make them give birth... to a child... Research...!"

"A child?"

"A special, special child... Aaah!"

At that moment, the Warden let out a scream of pain. It wasn't because of the illusion that Nahan showed him. He gushed blood from his eyes, nose, and ears, and died in an instant.

Silence swept over the body that had suddenly collapsed.

'I thought he hadn't written a vow of secrecy, but it seems he had.' Yuder looked down at the body with cold eyes.

'Research to make them give birth to a special child. What on earth does that mean?'

"...Wake the next person. We need to ask again."

Turning

Chapter 95

Nahan immediately woke the next person according to Yuder's demand. However, the others could not answer the same question at all.

The only thing Yuder could find out was the fact that the family had given more rewards than usual when they caught an Awakener with a certain condition, and there was a box containing a small amount of correspondence they had exchanged with the family.

"They gave rewards when you caught a certain Awakener? Say it again."

Yuder asked the same question again to the last person Nahan had woken. The man, who had gone mad after seeing the illusion shown by Nahan, replied, laughing with his mouth wide open.

"Whether it's Alpha or Omega, that. Hehe, hehehe. Especially when we handed over those who were in heat... So they told us to leave them alone until they were in heat and then send them, the Warden did. Hehehe. Kehehehe."

His babbling seemed insane, but the information that could be understood from his answer was clear.

The priests who were said to be conducting research while staying in the Apeto family were looking for awakened individuals who had manifested their second gender.

'Child. And the second gender....'

For some reason, he had a bad feeling about it. Yuder grabbed the collar of the man who was laughing madly and then shedding tears.

"Hey. There should be some remaining contracts here too, right? Find them."

After finding the remaining stack of contracts, Yuder rose from his seat holding them.

"Make sure these bastards don't mess around until I return."

"Are you going to that guy in the prison?"

Nahan asked in a soft voice.

"All I have to do is make him write the contract."

"It doesn't seem like a great idea, contracts are not absolute. That guy will someday repay today's mercy with enmity. Wouldn't it be easier just to kill him?"

"That's not your concern."

At Yuder's words, Nahan chuckled lowly. His smile still bore the cold and brutal traces, giving Yuder chills.

"Yes. It's none of my business."

As Yuder turned his body, Nahan's low voice echoed as if grabbing him from behind.

"But it was just advice from a brother."

"Eh, uh, ooh!"

Kiolle squirmed in fright when he saw Yuder's face spattered with fresh blood. Yuder couldn't be bothered to explain that it wasn't his blood, but the blood spurted from the dead Warden, so he thrust the contract he was holding in front of Kiolle's eyes.

"Quiet down and put your finger or something on here."

"Uh...?"

Kiolle stopped struggling and looked at the contract. There were a few sentences written in thin flame by Yuder while he was coming.

[One. Kiolle Da Diarca shall not tell anyone about the event that happened today.

Two. Kiolle Da Diarca cannot give unilateral commands, challenge to duels, or insult Yuder Aile or any other person.

Three. Kiolle Da Diarca shall help Yuder Aile within his capabilities.

Both parties will leave a contract mark on these matters.

If Kiolle Da Diarca violates any of the above, the contract mark will signal and notify, and the violator will fall into eternal sleep immediately.]

"What... what is this?"

As soon as Yuder untied the ropes and the gag, Kiolle screamed.

"Eternal sleep? What does that mean? Does it mean you'll kill me or not?"

"If you don't want to sign, then I'll leave immediately..."

"Damn it! I'll do it!"

Kiolle, his hand marked by rope burns, held up his hand, closed his eyes tight, and pressed his finger down. The moment he did so, a black smoke burst from the contract and in an instant, it had crept into the wrists of the two, leaving a mark behind.

"For your information, even if you leave here and try to kill me, it'll be useless. Because of the third clause, if you try to indirectly kill me, it would breach the contract."

"..."

Perhaps he had thought of it before, for Kiolle's eyes slightly trembled.

"So, what happens if you just happen to die in an accident?"

"If I die due to reasons unrelated to you, the contract will lose its power. The mark of the contract on your wrist will disappear."

"That won't affect me, will it?"

"Right. So, get up now. Surely you aren't pretending you need someone to help you stand."

At those words, Kiolle gritted his teeth and, with some difficulty, managed to push off the ground and stand up.

"So where are we headed now? Have you seen my sword? Where did you leave your companions? Don't tell me you killed all the dogs of the Apeto family? Or..."

Who on earth would believe that this noisy fool was a senior knight of the Imperial Knights? As Yuder, who had been leading, turned his head to say something, he suddenly felt a chill run down his spine.

Reactively gripping his sword and turning around, Yuder found himself halted at the sight of Nahan, a boy standing behind him, and the mercenary Awakeners with vacant expressions.

"Ah. You've already finished? That was quick."

"Where are the ones I told you to guard?"

"That's the thing. There was an unfortunate accident."

Nahan, his face spattered with blood like Yuder's, grinned quietly.

"I was just trying to keep them quiet for a bit, but they didn't seem to like that and ended up dying."

"What?"

"Really sorry about that."

From Nahan's calm expression, there was no sign of remorse typically associated with someone who had just caused an 'unfortunate accident'. Nahan, who had come close to Yuder, held out a box that had been hanging on his waist.

"Here. I brought this, so take it."

It was a box containing the letters through which the people of Apeto house there had communicated with their main house. Amid a stifling tension, Yuder slowly reached out and took it. At that moment, Kiolle, who had locked eyes with Nahan, froze like a herbivore in front of a predator.

"Let's free the brothers trapped in the prison now."

Nahan, with his smooth demeanor, approached the prison and re-emerged, leading the three mercenary Awakeners whom Yuder had imprisoned. He was unsure what ability Nahan had used, but they all had vacant expressions and were unusually docile.

'I can't see a trace of rationality in them. If he has such abilities, why didn't he use them before...'

Why did Nahan choose to act now, after waiting so long? Were the members of the Apeto family, whom he claimed died in an unfortunate accident, really just victims of an accident?

'Of course not.'

Yuder's caution heightened a notch further than before. Sensing his guarded eyes, Nahan turned around and gave a faint smile.

Facing his strange smile - one side horribly scarred, the other beautifully sculpted - Kiolle unwittingly took a step back, halting suddenly. Nahan, seemingly amused by his reaction, turned his head and opened his mouth towards Yuder.

"Aren't you leaving?"

"You go ahead."

There was no good to be found in exposing his back in such a situation. At Yuder's words, Nahan shrugged his shoulders and turned.

"As you wish, brother."

The way out was eerily quiet. Yuder didn't know what had become of Devran and the Awakened escapees they had encountered along the way, but at least no one was springing out of nowhere.

Even Kiolle, perhaps paralyzed by fear, had begun to quietly follow behind. The only sounds echoing through the darkness that half-shrouded them were the rhythmic footsteps as they trod the cave floor.

'...Footsteps.'

Suddenly, Yuder halted and looked to his side. Kiolle's flashy, high-quality boots brushed past him.

Catching sight of Kiolle's face, eerily illuminated by the light streaming from the magic stones embedded in the wall, Yuder immediately grabbed Kiolle's arm and started running forward.

'...Damn. Just as I thought.'

Despite Yuder's sudden grab and run, Kiolle showed no reaction. His expression was vacant, just like the mercenary Awakeners who had emerged from the prison and stood behind Nahan. There was no doubt that he had fallen prey to Nahan's illusion ability.

'He wasn't one to keep his mouth shut just because he was a bit scared.'

When had it started? Was it from the moment Kiolle tried to step back when they crossed paths at the prison? Recalling as he ran, Yuder gradually slowed and stopped.

"You had me wondering where you were going, brother."

Despite running a good distance backward, they found themselves once again before the vacant-faced mercenary Awakeners, the young boy, and Nahan. Nahan looked at Yuder with a composed expression and opened his mouth.

"I'm not sure why you're so guarded, but I don't think there's a need for that now that everything's over."

"Wouldn't you be guarded in this situation?"

Yuder asked coldly, looking around.

"Have you killed all of Apeto's people? Who are you going to kill next? Who the hell are you?"

"You already know who I am."

"I find it hard to believe at this point."

What certainty can there be against an illusionist who could suddenly twist the path ahead? To what extent was the Nahan that Yuder saw the real one?

Was he truly just a somewhat cruel bandit leader who gathered wandering Awakeners? Reading the whirl of suspicion in Yuder's eyes, Nahan chuckled.

"You're quite suspicious."

"Well, that's not so bad, either," Nahan muttered and turned his gaze to Kiolle's arm, held by Yuder.

"I mean no harm to your brother. Just let go of his arm. That's all."

'...Was Kiolle the target?'

In response, Yuder gripped Kiolle's arm even tighter.

"Kiolle Da Diarca."

"..."

No response came to the whispered name. Kiolle, with a vacant look like a puppet, merely swayed weakly as Yuder shook him.

"Kiolle!"

Even a slap that echoed loudly against his cheek did nothing. With a sigh at Kiolle's uselessness, Yuder looked back at Nahan.

"Don't tell me he stays like this forever unless you release him."

"Of course not. My ability isn't that powerful."

But Nahan's eyes said he had no intention of revealing the condition. If it had been usual, Yuder would have used his power to get rid of Nahan right there and then, but now his throbbing hand was a distraction and he couldn't immediately do so. Yuder held his silence for a moment, then opened his mouth.

Turning

Chapter 96

"Why do we have to kill this one too? Why?"

"Why are you so keen on protecting him? He's a worthless human being."

In Nahan's cold grey eyes, a ruthless gleam arose.

"There's no value in us fighting over that idiotic man. Haven't I been a decent ally up until now? Trust me. Let go of his arm and come here."

"..."

Yuder looked down at Kiolle's arm.

'Well, his point is hard to deny.'

Kiolle Diarca may indeed be a person not worth saving here. Perhaps he might regret this moment.

'However.'

Yuder took a deep breath and gripped Kiolle's arm even tighter.

"No."

Nahan's fleeting smile vanished the moment Yuder's resounding response echoed throughout the dark cave.

"What kind of ally kills all the witnesses on a whim, without any reason? I find you, who kills people as casually as a brainless nobleman, more distasteful."

Indeed. From the beginning, Nahan was a suspicious man. He was more elusive than Kiolle, who was transparent in every aspect—origin and character alike. It was disconcerting to Yuder that Nahan, unlike Kiolle, gave no hint of what he hid behind his back, no matter how amiable he seemed.

'Don't trust anything you can't clearly understand.' This was one of the advices left by Kishiar before he handed over his position in Yuder's previous life.

Yuder always recalled that advice when on a mission. It was the most practical and helpful advice of all.

"Stubbornness toward worthless targets only leads to unfavorable outcomes."

"And who are you to decide that? By what standards?"

At Yuder's question, Nahan fell silent. His left eye, marred by a red scar, stared blankly into space. Lost in thought, he slowly opened his mouth.

"The standard is simple. The presence or absence of power."

'Presence or absence of power?' Yuder repeated the unusual words in his mind, trying to memorize them.

"I will do anything for my brothers and sisters who share the same power and will. And I will take lives as payment from those who have insulted and trampled upon us. There are no negotiations."

With an emotionless voice, Nahan finished his sentence and turned his gaze back to Yuder.

"You're a smart brother. You must understand what I'm trying to say. Now let go of his hand..."

"...You're not just a simple bandit leader, are you?"

Yuder's sudden remark halted Nahan's speech.

"Where are you from? What's your purpose?"

Nahan had claimed that he and his bandits would leave the empire once they had gathered enough money. However, thinking back, the bandits were also Awakeners, who had left their original homes, and the dazed-faced mercenaries standing behind him were also Awakeners.

Considering the boy he had come all the way here to save was also an Awakener, it seemed that Nahan's purpose in gathering the Awakeners was not for personal or pure reasons.

'Was there an individual or group trying to gather Awakeners who had lost their way during this time? There wasn't in my previous life.'

"Are you targeting the Cavalry? Or is rebellion your goal?"

"Neither," Nahan replied.

Yuder, who had been intensely pondering and about to speak, was shortly interrupted by Nahan, who furrowed his brows.

"Really, such a suspicious brother. Why does it matter whether I belong somewhere or not? All I want is to clean up this mess and leave."

At the same time as he moved his finger subtly, Kiolle, with a dumbfounded expression, started shaking his arm forcefully to shake off Yuder's hand. The force was strong enough that it could have slipped in an instant.

"Let go."

"I said I don't want to, ah."

In the moment Yuder was about to respond, Kiolle had stopped struggling and tried to kick him. Yuder dodged it and, clicking his tongue, struck Kiolle's nape hard.

It was a strength enough to knock out a common person or even a trained knight, but surprisingly, Kiolle did not fall. He just opened his mouth dumbly and tried to escape Yuder.

"I can't understand. Why are you going to such lengths?"

"I told you. I don't like your side, more than this guy. So, and..."

Yuder, while trying to suppress the increasingly violently resisting Kiolle, raised his voice.

"Don't order me around because you're upset. There's only one person who can command me!"

The moment his words ended, Yuder buried Kiolle in the ground, leaving only his head exposed. Kiolle, buried deep below the collapsed ground, twitched as he let out a low moan, but he couldn't break free from the hardened soil.

At the same time, Yuder's arm throbbed heavily.

'I tried not to use my power... I had no choice.'

Yuder, while glaring at Nahan, the culprit who forced him to use his power, drew his sword from his waist. As flames began to crawl up the blade in a spiral, Nahan was seen frowning.

"Planning to attack?"

"You started it."

Nahan frowned. His expression seemed strangely like he wanted to laugh, but also didn't.

"Well, fine. Then I'll do my best to get rid of this trash."

"Using powers against brothers was strictly prohibited, but there was no choice with a skilled person like you." As soon as those words ended, Nahan's face started to ripple.

As soon as he saw it, his head and body became rapidly heavy. Yuder instinctively realized he was trying to use an illusion power against him.

'He's trying to incapacitate me and achieve his objective in the meantime...!'

Yuder quickly used his power to protect Kiolle, who was buried in the ground. However, in that moment, the scenery before his eyes abruptly changed with a swift sound of wind.

'Yudrain.'

It was a very strange sensation. Yuder was certainly aware that he was kneeling inside a cave holding onto Kiolle, but at the same time he saw a beautiful golden-haired man speaking to him. It was Kishiar in his white uniform.

Obviously, Kishiar was the illusion. He was someone who couldn't appear here now. Plus, he was calling him Yudrain, not Yuder. A name that no longer had a reason to be called.

His cool reason made the obvious judgment, but even knowing that, Yuder stiffened for a moment.

'This trick.'

'Yudrain.'

Kishiar called Yuder again. The enchantingly captivating low voice echoed in his ears.

He had to ignore it. He needed to avert his gaze from those crimson eyes. Even though he knew he needed to move somehow, his hand wouldn't obey, as though caught by something...

"Was it a good experience? The one where you plunged your knife into my heart."

Kishiar lowered the hand he had been holding near his chest. A gaping hole, where blood gushed ceaselessly, was visible between the black gloves he wore. Yuder knew the nature of that wound very well.

It was a wound that he himself had inflicted.

Before he knew it, Yuder realized he was panting heavily.

"It's all an illusion."

He knew it. He knew it, yet why couldn't he tear his gaze away from Kishiar? His heart was pounding so hard that he could feel it reverberating through his fingertips.

The strength slowly ebbed from the hand that held Kiolle. Behind Kishiar's illusion, Yuder saw Nahan, looking down at him with gray eyes shining.

Nahan was quietly smiling as he watched Yuder's distorted expression. Seeing that, a semblance of reason flickered in Yuder's warped mind.

"Perhaps, this is an illusion to stimulate the subject's fear and to drain their spirit. That guy, he doesn't know Kishiar. So this is purely... an element drawn from my own memory..."

"Yudrain."

The chain of thoughts that had barely been forming shattered instantly at Kishiar's call. The illusion of Kishiar approached and knelt on one knee in front of Yuder. Yuder was overwhelmed by a powerful urge to release his grip on Kiolle and retreat.

"Answer me."

An incorporeal bloodied hand came closer and touched his cheek. Despite being an illusion, the sensation was so vivid that it sent shivers down his spine. Yuder gritted his teeth at the sensation of the blood from Kishiar's body soaking his cheek.

"Answer me, Yudrain."

He almost responded reflexively. But he mustn't answer. He could sense it instinctively. If he responded to those words, then, he would be succumbing to the intense pressure weighing on his head and shoulders.

"To break free from a mental. From a mental ability attack. The general way is..."

He desperately tried to hold on to his numbing sense of reason and remember. This was his first encounter with such a potent illusion ability, but he had met enough psychic ability users. Usually, to counter such abilities that target the mind...

"Attack the caster, or else."

The sound of his gasping breath pounded in his ears like a drum. Yuder glared into Kishiar's red eyes and raised the sword he had been holding in one hand. Following this, a small sound, as if something made of flesh and blood had been brutally sliced, echoed within the cave.

"..."

A moment later, Yuder, gasping for breath, opened his eyes. Intense pain radiated from the arm that he had deliberately cut deeply. But his mind was clear, and Kishiar was no longer in sight.

Instead, the sight that came into his sharpened view was of Nahan, who had approached unnoticed and was swinging a blood-soaked dagger at Kiolle.

"This bastard."

Without wasting a moment, Yuder swung his own sword to block Nahan. With a sharp clang, the two swords collided forcefully. While parrying Nahan's sword, Yuder used the wind to fling him ruthlessly against the cave wall and picked up Kiolle from the ground.

Chapter 97

"Ugh... What... what is this...."

At the same time Nahan's body violently collided with the wall, Kiolle managed to somewhat pull herself out of the illusion and regain consciousness. Groaning softly, she shook his head.

"Why does my arm hurt so... No, why... why am I covered in dirt...? What is this!"

"That's not the problem. If you've regained your senses, run quickly!"

The boy, Nahan's companion, started running toward him. Yuder grabbed Kiolle, who had thankfully recovered enough to maintain a good speed, and they both sprinted.

Without looking back, they fled from the cave. Outside, the day was faintly fading as the sun began to dip behind the mountains.

"We... we finally made it out... But what the hell just happened? What was that..."

"Be quiet."

Fighting a dizzying wave of vertigo, Yuder moved forward. This was where they had tied up and hidden two mercenary Awakeners before entering the cave.

For better or worse, the only things left were the loosened gags and ropes. No one remained.

'Hopefully, they were discovered by Devran's group, took a beating, and ran....'

"What... what's this rope for?"

Kiolle exclaimed at the sight of the gags and pieces of rope. Yuder didn't respond, just kept walking. His arm throbbed incessantly. The pain from the knife wound paled in comparison to the throbbing sensation welling up from his puncture wound.

Yet he could endure that much pain. Currently, Yuder's mind was filled with questions about Nahan's unexpectedly powerful abilities and his true identity.

'Perhaps Nahan is more important than even Apeto Family. Why didn't such a conspicuous person appear in my past life? Did he continually hide himself with his illusionary abilities? Or perhaps....'

"That one hurt a bit."

At that moment, an unbelievable voice came from ahead. Yuder turned his head, following Kiolle's wide-eyed gaze.

Incredibly, Nahan and the small boy who were undoubtedly left behind in the cave, as well as the still dazed mercenary Awakeners, all stood there.

'Did I mistakenly think that what I left behind was an illusion?'

For a moment, that doubt sprouted in his mind, but Yuder soon realized it was not the case. Blood was seeping from a cut on Nahan's forehead, proving that the collision was real. But how could they have gotten here faster than Yuder and Kiolle?

"It seems my power even surprises a great warrior like you."

Nahan smirked at Yuder's expression.

"It's simple. I can use my power more deeply than usual on a few targets I choose for a certain amount of time. The duration is short, but the effect is certain."

"..."

"The more you doubt and get confused, the deeper you fall into the illusion. A beautiful illusion that surpasses even the senses in reality. Just like now, when you think we've teleported, but we actually just walked past you."

A cold smile crossed Nahan's face. After a moment of silence, Yuder asked,

"Why are you bothering to explain all this?"

"Because it helps to amplify the doubt. I have no choice but to do my best to incapacitate someone who managed to break even a powerful illusion that most people couldn't endure. It's quite beneficial."

If what he had said was true, Yuder, who had been made a fool of his sense of time and space, was clearly heavily eroded by the power of that profound illusion.

What would happen when he was completely consumed by that ability? The face of Kishiar he had seen in the illusion moments ago flashed across his mind.

"..."

Yuder sighed, feeling both of his hands, as if they had been sliced and speckled by a blade, throb simultaneously.

'No, let's not think too deeply. He must have said that hoping for this kind of reaction.'

Showing signs of being disturbed was the worst thing one could do when facing an Awakener who could directly influence one's mind.

Yuder breathed deeply and slightly rolled up his uniform sleeve. A very small red dot was visible on the inside of his left wrist, still bleeding. It was the seal he had imprinted when he made a pact with Kiolle earlier. After confirming its existence, he felt calm again.

'The fact that this remains means Kiolle is not dead, which means the guy next to me is not an illusion.'

There was no way the illusion would have chased him this far if Kiolle was already dead, using more of its illusionary ability on Yuder. Yuder turned his head towards Kiolle, who stood frozen, unable to utter a word.

His foolish expression somehow felt like the most certain evidence that he wasn't an illusion, and Yuder found his mind somewhat more at ease.

'I never thought I'd feel this way looking at his face.'

"Kiolle da Diarca."

"Why?"

Kiolle responded with a pale, scared face.

"Stay close behind me. The moment you separate, those bastards will kill you."

"Why would they want to kill me? Are they the ones who hold a grudge against Diarca?"

"No, it's just that they really want to kill you because you're such a piece of trash."

"What...?"

Kiolle gaped, his facial expression cycling through myriad feelings of astonishment, as he looked back and forth between Yuder and Nahan.

"Still, you're trying to protect me, right? Then I..."

"Of course I think you're trash too. I'm not protecting you because I like it, so just shut up and stay quiet."

Worried about any possible misunderstanding, Yuder made sure to speak clearly. Kiolle retreated slowly with a somewhat shocked expression. Thankfully, after writing the vow, he seemed to obey orders a bit quicker.

'Whether Nahan really used the deep illusion ability or not, I can't afford to waste more time here.'

If it wasn't for the spreading speck on his right hand, Yuder would have been able to hold out until Nahan's 'time limit' is over and capture them all here.

But that wasn't possible now. The pain spreading up his arm was certainly abnormal, indicating that the spot was moving upward. If this continued and it somehow interfered with his ability, it was clear what Nahan, who was quick to notice, would do.

"You're not giving up till the end, brother? How do you plan to escape my ability? Especially when you have no one to help you."

Nahan tilted his head leisurely, as if watching the rebellion of a cornered prey.

"No matter how powerful an ability you have, if your sense of reality is breaking down, hitting me will become more and more difficult. An attack that can't hit is just a waste of power."

He muttered, gently patting the head of the boy standing next to him.

"Just admit it now. Your head is getting increasingly dizzy and your body heavy, isn't it exhausting just to bear it? You've been looking quite strained since a while ago."

As soon as Yuder heard his words, as if some magical incantation was spoken, his limbs grew heavier and his head began to spin again. He wondered if Nahan had noticed something amiss with his arm, but that didn't seem likely. Nonetheless, it was clear his condition was gradually deviating from normal.

Yuder squinted as he felt an intensifying pain that felt like his entire shoulder was pulling downwards, stretching beyond his right elbow.

"Well... there's no need, really, to confirm it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"This is what I mean."

Nahan's expression subtly changed, as if he had sensed something. In response, Yuder clenched his fist instead of answering, drawing on all his strength.

Suddenly, a massive pillar of fire erupted in front of Yuder. He felt the scream of Kiolle from behind him, accompanied by a deafening explosion.

"Aargh!"

At the same time, Yuder's right arm stiffened due to the most intense pain he'd ever experienced. The pain was so intense that it made him feel as if his vision was briefly whitening.

Regardless of whether Kiolle was sprawled out and screaming, the flames summoned by Yuder surely incinerated the surroundings, spreading higher, ever higher. The vast and overpowering flames, which obscured the figures of Nahan and others in the distance, looked like a protective wall for Yuder.

And when that fire eventually penetrated even the clouds and stretched high into the sky, Yuder felt his previously disoriented consciousness clear up, along with a sensation as if the opaque wall shielding him was breaking down, and the surrounding air became sharp.

It was a sight similar to when he first met Nahan and he had dispelled the illusion cast over the vast area.

'So my hunch was correct after all.'

Nahan had continued to skillfully speak as if he had been using profound abilities solely on Yuder, but this wouldn't explain why Kiolle also continued to be under the same influence. However, Yuder remembered the fact that Nahan's ability initially affected a specific range.

'There were many Awakeners before who could use more advanced abilities than their original ones under certain conditions. But it's difficult to think that these conditions are exactly as Nahan himself described.'

If Nahan's advanced ability was not affecting a certain target as he claimed, but instead adjusting the range more freely than usual, everything would be explained.

And for any ability that influences a specified range, the best way to break it is to shatter everything with an overwhelming power from within.

That was something Yuder did best.

'He must have felt the area of the illusion ability that had been covering us breaking, and he should realize there's no chance of winning since from that distance others could clearly see...'

Then the only choice left was to run. Yuder believed that even in such a situation, he wouldn't be so obstinate as to insist on killing Kiolle.

Just then, the ground shook violently and Kiolle screamed even louder.

Turning

Chapter 98

'It's a shame that I couldn't capture him and discern his identity, but it won't be the last chance.'

Nahan. As Yuder whispered this name, he recalled the man who exuded such a dangerously overwhelming aura. It was rare to remember a stranger one had met only once, but that man was vividly etched in his mind.

'But... considering that I am trembling all the way up to my shoulders... I'm worried about how Kishiar will react.'

He wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but it seemed as if he could hear his name being called from a distance. Yuder gradually extinguished the column of fire that had blazed hot enough to scorch his entire body.

The forest, surprisingly pristine for a place where a massive fire had raged for quite a while, revealed itself. Kiolle, who had been crouching with his head down, slowly lifted his head and looked perplexed at the deserted scenery.

"Where did they go, those guys...?"

Unlike Kiolle who was simply scanning the area, Yuder looked down at the few strange traces left on the ground. Seeing the ground seemingly forced open then covered again, he had an idea of the method Nahan and the boy might have used to escape.

'A kid who can make friends, huh? I guess his friends aren't human.'

Among the countless monsters that suddenly appeared on the continent, some had been accepted as unique native creatures, living almost harmlessly and hidden for a long time. The Rumvet, a monster that could always be found by digging deeply into any mountain, was one of them.

The Rumvet, shaped like a giant worm, was harmless to humans as it only burrowed and lived underground. Yuder, through his long experience of monster extermination missions, knew several habits of the Rumvet.

One of them was that it would block the entrance from the inside after burrowing into a tunnel, secreting a fluid that hardened the soil. Seeing the moist ground around him emitting a faint stinging smell, he was certain that a Rumvet had indeed burrowed out of the ground and returned not long ago.

The ability to summon and control a monster hidden deep underground as if it were a friend was definitely a power worth risking danger to rescue for someone like Nahan.

The earth's intense shaking after the creation of the fire pillar must have been due to that.

'A monster-controlling Awakener... While it wasn't unheard of in my previous life, I've heard it's quite difficult to control a large monster like a Rumvet.'

If he had the power to summon and control a giant monster so silently, why didn't he escape immediately while he was imprisoned? Was there a problem with using his ability?

Remembering the silent boy, Yuder decided to also keep the boy's face in mind along with Nahan.

"Yuder, Yuder!..." At that moment, the urgent voices calling out Yuder's name were indeed real this time. They were the voices of Gakane, Jimmy, and Devran.

He had anticipated someone would rush over upon seeing the fire pillar, but he was a little surprised that they hadn't left this place yet.

'Did something else happen?'

But the first thing he felt upon hearing his comrades' voices was a strange and clear sense of relief.

"Yuder!"

Gakane was the first to appear. His face turned pale as soon as he saw Yuder standing with his left hand cut by a knife and bleeding. Gakane, who had run at full speed, carefully lifted Yuder's hand.

"My goodness, was it you who conjured that column of fire earlier? But what in the world... who inflicted such a wound on you?"

"I did."

"What?"

"Both the fire and the wound, I caused them myself."

"Yuder!"

As Yuder calmly responded, Gakane, doubting his own ears, stood in silence. Meanwhile, Jimmy, the second to emerge from the thicket, ran towards them with a worried look on his face but abruptly stopped upon noticing Kiolle, who was awkwardly standing in the rear.

"Uh...? That man... isn't he the knight from the Imperial Palace Knights? Why is he here? And in such a state..."

Hearing the cautious words of the boy, Gakane turned and finally noticed Kiolle, wearing an astonished expression.

"You are..."

"Uh, hem! Hem!"

Unable to discuss the events due to the vow he'd taken, Kiolle glanced at Yuder, coughing as if to prompt an explanation. The sight of him moments ago, terrified and prostrate on the ground, screaming, had long since vanished.

Even though he was covered in dirt, far from his usual noble appearance, Yuder chose not to comment.

"I rescued him from the ones who had taken Devran."

"What? So, did you get hurt trying to save this man?"

"...Somehow, yes."

"What? Yuder, you just said that you inflicted the wound on yourself. So, you hurt yourself to protect him? Why on earth?"

"What? Gakane, what do you mean?"

"Yuder said it himself."

"Does that mean..."

Before Yuder could even respond, both Gakane and Jimmy, who'd quickly exchanged a conversation, fixed their fierce gaze on Kiolle. Yuder opened his mouth, watching as Kiolle visibly stiffened in surprise.

"That's not it..."

"What's going on, Gakane, Jimmy? Don't leave me behind. I still find it hard to run."

Fortunately, Devran appeared at that moment, attracting everyone's attention.

"I saw a huge fire and thought something incredibly serious must have happened here, but it seems relatively peaceful. What happened?"

Meeting Devran for the first time in a few hours, Yuder noticed that his friend appeared much better, having changed into clean clothes and tended to his wounds.

"Yuder, where's that scarred guy who was with you? And who is this new person? What happened to those people in the cave you said you'd deal with?"

"It's a bit of a long story."

Thinking of Nahan, Yuder felt his relaxing nerves sharpen once again. He sighed softly, turning his head towards the direction of the cave. Considering the events that had transpired, he needed to return as soon as possible.

"Things got a bit complicated."

"...Complicated? You didn't let them escape, did you?"

Devran, who bore a grudge against the people of the Apeto family, asked with a grim expression.

"No. They're all dead."

"Dead? Did you kill them?"

"No."

"Then who..."

As Devran paused mid-sentence, both Gakane and Jimmy also wore strange expressions.

Looking at Yuder's unusually cold gaze, they inferred that the man who had vanished from here was likely the cause of the complication. Although they didn't know the specifics, it was clear that something significant had happened.

Gakane, sensing the sudden change in atmosphere, donned a smile and looked around before speaking.

"Alright, now that we've found Yuder, let's head down for some healing first. We can chat about the details on the way."

"But before that."

"Hmm?"

Gakane turned his head towards Yuder, who had raised his hand to interrupt.

"Why are you still here? I thought I clearly told you to evacuate and not return to the village."

"Ah... that's the thing. Zakail's brother came back and the situation changed. Do you remember? That guy who was said to be in a relationship with Devran's sister..."

"...He came back?"

"Yes. It seems Zakail tried to delay his return, but it actually sped up the man's arrival... Anyway, Zakail is locked up well. Considering we have injured, including Devran, it seemed better to rest and heal before leaving the village immediately..."

'So that's what happened.' Yuder, hearing Gakane's brief explanation, quickly inferred the unfolding situation. He nodded in response to the story that wasn't too far from his own assumptions.

"Got it. And, Devran."

"Hmm?"

"Did you see the two people who were tied up there while escaping?"

Devran nodded nonchalantly upon spotting the dropped gag and cord Yuder pointed to.

"Those guys? I saw them. When I came out, they were visible so I showed them some action and drove them out. Why do you ask?"

"No. It's fine. As long as they escaped alive, it's good."

It was fortunate amidst the misfortune that there were still people who could testify about what the Apeto family did here. They just needed to be found and apprehended.

Yuder finally let go of the tension in his trembling arm. As he turned his head, Kiolle, who had been nervously waiting behind him, stepped back with a start.

"Kiolle."

"W-What. You, earlier, you were in a state of emergency so I didn't point it out, but if you keep casually calling my name..."

Even while failing to hide his fear, he attempted to reassert his authority in front of the others, which almost appeared pitiful. Yuder ignored his words and continued.

"You use informal language with me too."

"I do! Our statuses are different, and I'm older, so where do you get the nerve...!"

Just then, a tingling sensation pulsed from the mark of contract inscribed on Yuder's wrist. It seemed Kiolle felt the same as he abruptly closed his mouth and clenched his teeth.

"...Do as you please!"

In the end, he spat out those words with a face full of humiliation before sharply turning his head away. Of course, it wasn't Yuder's business to know.

"I intend to. Anyway, those who wanted to kill you are gone now, and it seems you won't forget our agreement. So for now, you should just head back as you are."

Turning

Chapter 99

"Return? In this state?"

Kiolle retorted in a voice thick with disbelief.

"How could I explain what happened here because of you? I have to speak of Paviel, who died..."

"That's for you to worry about. If word reaches my ear that there has been any suspicious movement from Diarca House in the vicinity of this place, then you'll find yourself sealed in a coffin, forever asleep."

Looking at Yuder who murmured ominously, a curse of eternal sleep and eventual death, anger flared in Kiolle's eyes once again. Yet, the fear of the overwhelming force he faced remained alive within him.

"..."

After glancing at the faces of Yuder and the people around him, Kiolle slowly stepped backward. Moments later, he turned and sprinted away without a backwards glance.

"He acted so arrogant, but he couldn't move at Yuder's words."

Jimmy sneered with a satisfied look on his face, watching Kiolle disappear. However, Gakane whispered something to Yuder with a somewhat uncomfortable expression.

"Is it okay to let him go just like that? If he talks nonsense about us after he returns, we might be challenged by Diarca House."

"No need to worry about it. He made an oath to keep his mouth shut in exchange for his life."

"An oath? You managed that in such a short time? Well... I trust you've handled it, Yuder."

Nodding in acceptance, Gakane's gaze then fell upon Yuder's arm.

"It seems like you're still bleeding. Are you feeling dizzy? Let's get moving."

"Yeah, let's go. If a person loses too much blood, they could faint."

Yuder gave one last glance towards the cave entrance before heading down the mountain with his comrades. During the descent, he explained briefly about what had transpired in the cave. For a while, the three companions remained silent, apparently shocked.

Jimmy couldn't comprehend Nahan's strange actions, Gakane deeply regretted not being at Yuder's side, and Devran was chilled by the words hinting that deeper darkness might be hidden behind the heinous acts committed by the Apeto family, targeting the Awakeners.

However, they all agreed on one thing: they needed to report everything to Kishiar as soon as possible.

"You are Yuder Aile, the assistant to the Commander of the cavalry, aren't you? I've heard about you from the others."

Upon his return to Hartan, Yuder immediately met with Zakail's brother, Zachlis. His physical condition wasn't the best, but it was tolerable considering the countless severe injuries he'd experienced in his previous life.

Compared to then, when he could only receive treatment after reporting to the Emperor despite his serious injuries, he was relatively at ease. Currently, he sat comfortably, receiving treatment for a sword wound while having a conversation with Zachlis.

Furthermore, Zachlis, unlike Zakail, was a man he could easily converse with.

"I'll get straight to the point. I love Dermilla, and I want her brother Devran to fare well as he is her family. I will do whatever it takes to achieve that."

"Does that mean, unlike the late lord, you won't support Diarca House?"

When Yuder asked directly, without any sugarcoating, Zachlis' eyes widened slightly before he nodded with a resolute look filling his good-natured face.

"Yes."

This word was, in effect, Zachlis declaring that he could support the Cavalry and behind them, Duke Peletta Kishiar, and even further, the Emperor. If things were as they originally were, a single knight making such a statement wouldn't have been particularly interesting. But now, things were different.

Zachlis Hartan was in a position to become the Lord of Hartan if he so wished. Even though Hartan was a small fief, it was undeniably one of the traditional and long-standing noble families of the East.

Planting someone on his side at the center of the Eastern power base that supported the Diarca family wouldn't be a bad story for Kishiar or the Emperor.

Moreover, if Zachlis were to become their ally, they could proceed with addressing the matter of Zakail and Apeto's collusion, and the issues caused by the Apeto family in the East, much more swiftly and easily.

Having finished his calculations, Yuder nodded and met Zachlis' gaze directly.

"I understand. I will certainly convey your thoughts to our Commander. After we leave, the Commander will contact you directly. Until then, it would be best if you maintain a position no different from your previous Lord on the surface."

In Yuder's words, implying that Zachlis should maintain a friendly demeanor towards the Diarca Duchy until contacted by Kishiar, Zachlis responded with a faint smile.

"Understood. Let's keep Zakail from coming out until then. If I find the two Awakeners who escaped as you mentioned, I will contact you."

Yuder had asked Zachlis to search for the two mercenary Awakeners who had been beaten by Devran and had fled, and to monitor the vicinity of the cave where they had been hiding. Since everyone there had either died or fled, it was certain that the Apeto family would notice something amiss and start an investigation. They needed to find the escaped mercenaries before they did.

"Um... I've finished treating the wound on your left hand, but do you have any other injuries?"

Noticing that their conversation was about to wrap up, the physician cautiously interjected. Yuder looked at his bandaged left forearm and shook his head.

"I'm fine."

"Your right hand seems to be uncomfortable, too..."

Was it that noticeable? Yuder tried to ignore his right arm, which was still throbbing intermittently, and shook his head.

"I'm not uncomfortable. I'm fine. Why don't you go?"

"Ah, okay..."

"I'm going to get up now. I hope you rest well tonight and have a safe journey back."

As the physician stood, Zachlis also rose. Yuder had already informed him that he would leave quietly early in the morning, so there was no need for formalities.

After they had left, Yuder was alone in the bedroom. Since he had sent everyone else out on the pretext of talking with Zachlis, this was his only chance to check how far the spots on his right arm had spread.

Yuder quickly removed his gloves and the top of his uniform and unbuttoned the undershirt he had worn underneath.

'This is...'

He had expected it, but the sight revealed under his clothes was absolutely grim. From the tips of his right fingers, over the elbow, all the way to the shoulder, his entire arm was completely stained with a dark purple hue. His forehead involuntarily wrinkled at the ominous color, resembling that of venom.

"It doesn't look good..."

However, there was one thing that differed from his expectations. The palm of his hand had turned a deep purple, almost black, while the area near his shoulder was a very pale violet. He wasn't sure why there was a color difference, but he made a mental note of it, since any piece of information might be useful.

As he clenched and then released his fist, his arm spasmed again. Without thinking, Yuder gritted his teeth and exhaled. That was when it happened.

"Hey, Yuder. Are you done talking with Sir Zachlis? Listen to me for a moment. My sister, Dermilla, said she won't be going to the capital tomorrow..."

"Yuder! I finished writing the report to send to the commander before we leave, could you check if there's anything missing...?"

"..."

The moment Devran and Gakane, who had burst open the door and poked their faces in, saw his body and fell into silence, Yuder felt a rare sense of awkwardness.

'I should have locked the door before undressing.'

In his hurry to check the spots, he had completely forgotten. How was he going to explain the unusual purple spot, where it came from, how it appeared, and to what extent? It felt more difficult than facing someone who killed indiscriminately.

"Guys, why haven't you said a word since we left until now? Did something happen while I was asleep?"

The group that left Hartan at dawn the next day kept riding without uttering a word until sunrise. Unlike the original plan, the other Awakeners they rescued from the cave of the Apeto family, as well as Devran's family, remained in the village. Devran was the only addition to the group, so their speed was remarkably fast.

The reason was simple. It was because of the condition of Yuder's right arm, which was revealed last night.

Yuder tried his best to explain the reason for the spot to Gakane and Devran, but it was no use. After all, Yuder himself knew nothing more than speculation that the spot was caused by the energy from the red stone.

In the end, he roughly concluded that it had been like this since before he arrived here and that he had been trying to improve the condition with the methods that Commander Kishiar knew, as the treatment method was not yet clear.

Gakane and Devran were silent for a while. Devran seemed to look at Yuder, who had come to save him despite such a terrible condition of his arm, as if seeing him anew. Gakane, who quickly guessed what "before he came here" meant, wore a complex expression. Yuder discreetly made a gesture to Gakane, avoiding Devran, and slightly shook his head. It meant not to mention it directly, no matter what he guessed. Fortunately, Gakane understood him immediately. After that, they decided to minimize the group, as they were doing now.

'After all, since Sir Zachlis is in Hartan now, there's no need to worry about the families and others staying here for a while. But you... no way.'

'Yes, Yuder. I'll send the report as it is, so take a rest for now.'

Because he was feeling slightly feverish again, Jimmy, who had gone to sleep early by himself, wasn't too surprised when they said that only four of them would go to the capital first, contrary to the plan. However, it was odd that everyone continued to ride without saying a word even after sunrise.

"There was nothing, Jimmy."

Gakane forced a smile, but Jimmy wasn't easily placated.

"But... the way you keep leading on Yuder's horse, surely something must have happened, right? It's strange that everyone is so quiet, excluding me. It makes me feel left out."

Ironically, Yuder, who had injured both arms, found it uncomfortable to hold the reins as tightly as he used to. Yuder himself didn't mind, but it was due to the objections of the others against him riding alone.

'It's still better than riding together.'

In fact, Gakane had suggested not just weaving the reins together, but actually sharing a ride. However, the horses were already too weak to accommodate two large men.

"Jimmy. You should be more concerned about your health. How's your fever?"

In the end, Yuder spoke up. Jimmy's slight fever had not subsided even after sleep, and had instead worsened. Whether it was because he thought that the tense mission was finally over, or because of some other factor, the boy's cheeks and forehead were still notably red.

Before they set off, Yuder had felt Jimmy's forehead and had the feeling that the boy would soon truly manifest his second gender.

Turning

Chapter 100

"Don't worry, it should be fine until we head back."

"Speak up immediately if you feel the slightest discomfort."

"Okay..."

At the mention of his physical condition, Jimmy instantly fell silent. In this way, the party hastened their pace towards the capital.

"If nothing unforeseen happens, we should arrive soon. How are you feeling, Yuder?"

Riding alongside him, Gakane's voice was clearly audible. It was a question he'd asked several times before, but given Gakane's visibly worried expression, Yuder couldn't bring himself to tell him to stop asking.

"I'm fine."

Although his answer implied that his condition hadn't worsened since the previous day due to not using his powers, Gakane, unaware of this, simply nodded in relief.

"I hope we can pass through the city gates quickly today. It's always so slow because of the sheer number of people in the capital."

Although it was easy to leave the capital, entering was a different matter. It wasn't easy to pass through the security check by the capital's outermost guard.

Unless one was of imperial lineage, even nobles had to undergo a thorough security check, and only after passing through this could they be allowed into the outermost part of the capital, towards the 7th wall.

However, when the party finally reached the checkpoint, they realized their worries had been unfounded.

"Are you part of the Cavalry?"

A soldier, seeing them from the end of the long line in front of the checkpoint, approached and spoke to them after seeing their black uniforms.

"Ah, yes. We are."

"Do you have anything to prove your identity?"

At the soldier's query, Gakane showed him a button on his uniform sleeve. It appeared to be a regular metal button, but in reality, it was made from a magic stone that had been processed to resist any kind of shock.

The soldier carefully examined the Cavalry emblem engraved on the button, then nodded and gestured towards the inside of the checkpoint.

"Your identity has been confirmed. Please proceed inside."

"Excuse me?"

"When you arrive, you were to be directed there immediately."

"Directed?"

Gakane blinked in surprise, then glanced at Yuder. Yuder could feel his concealed arm throbbing and looked at the checkpoint building the soldier was indicating. There was only one reason that could allow such an exception.

A person who could pass through the gates of the capital at will. In other words, it had to be an imperial command.

"...Let's go."

Yuder began walking, putting strength in his legs to keep himself from stumbling. The party quickly followed after handing all their reins to the soldier.

"I wonder who gave such an order. It's not just to let us pass, but why are they asking us to go there..."

"Don't worry. It must be someone we know."

Yuder lightly patted Jimmy's shrunken shoulders before stepping into the checkpoint. Everyone inside seemed to have been cleared out in advance, leaving the interior eerily quiet. Yuder locked eyes with a man slowly rising from his seated position.

A beautiful white face, wise red eyes under golden lashes.

The moment their eyes met, the persistent pain in his arm was forgotten.

"Exactly, it's the third day."

Not in his usual white uniform but dressed as befitting an imperial family member and a duke, Kishiar rose with a captivating smile in his eyes that could bewitch anyone.

"Congratulations on safely returning from your mission."

"Commander!"

Jimmy's startled cry echoed from behind Yuder. Only then did Yuder regain his bearings and, along with his other comrades, bowed his head in salute.

"How did you get here?"

"Thanks to this final letter that arrived this morning."

Kishiar lightly shook the letter he held in his hand, showing it off. It was the final letter written and sent by Gakane last night. Fortunately, Kishiar seemed to have received the letter in good time before their arrival.

"If it hadn't been for this, we might have missed each other. We were actually supposed to set off for Hartan today."

"You, Commander?"

At Devran's startled question, Kishiar nodded.

"I had the feeling that the situation wouldn't be normal, so I wanted to check it out myself. Thanks to my capable assistant who finished everything in just three days, I couldn't do that."

Kishiar's gaze was still soft, as if joking, but Yuder thought that his demeanor seemed a bit different than usual.

"I figured there wouldn't be time to wait for an examination, so I ordered to call you here immediately upon your return. Perhaps it was an unnecessary consideration?"

"No, not at all. We didn't know that you would personally come out... As you would know if you've read the letter, if you hadn't sent people to find me, I might not have even been able to return from the vacation and might have died. I am truly grateful for saving me and my family..."

The usually rugged Devran blushed awkwardly in front of Kishiar. At the sight of him, Jimmy couldn't help but cough to hide his laughter, and Gakane slightly bit his lip.

Fortunately, Devran was too focused on Kishiar to notice his comrades' expressions.

"The thanks should go to your comrades, not me. Now, you should go back immediately. A carriage is waiting behind the checkpoint."

"Ah, yes, we understand!"

After Devran, Gakane, and Jimmy hurriedly left through the back door of the checkpoint, Yuder slowly followed them. Kishiar slowly approached him and opened his mouth in a low voice that no one else could hear.

"It spread to your shoulder."

Even without a subject, Yuder immediately knew what he was talking about.

"That is the case."

"You were not the only Awakeners who went there, but you are the only one who came back injured. What am I supposed to think?"

His voice was soft but clearly lower than usual. Yuder remained silent for a moment before replying quietly.

"I apologize. I was careless."

"I didn't want to hear an apology."

Kishiar's gaze shifted from the bandaged left arm to the seemingly healthy right arm. He didn't take his eyes off Yuder's right hand for a long time.

"Does it hurt?"

"I can't deny it... It's a little painful compared to before... Ah!"

Before he could finish speaking, Kishiar suddenly grasped his right hand. It was a motion made without much strength, but as soon as he touched it, his entire right arm felt as if it was deeply pricked and throbbed painfully, making Yuder unconsciously clench his teeth.

Seeing Yuder's slightly distorted face from bearing the pain, a shadow of concern passed over Kishiar's face.

"I made the right choice to wait here just in case..."

He released Yuder's hand. Yuder endured the tingling pain and looked up at Kishiar.

"We need to leave quickly. It seems we'll have a lot to do as soon as we get back."

"Welcome back."

True to Kishiar's words, Nathan Zuckerman, his adjutant, slightly poked his head from the inside of the black carriage parked outside the checkpoint's back gate and greeted them.

As Yuder climbed into the carriage, he remembered Kishiar's face from his dream. The real-life Kishiar was undoubtedly different from the one in his dream, a fact that was more pronounced now that they were face to face.

Only then did it dawn on him that he was really back.

'...Had I been anxious all this while?'

He looked down at his own gloved hand and wondered this strange thought.

He couldn't find an answer.

The cavalry building they returned to appeared as tranquil as ever. After directing Gakane, Devran, and Jimmy to rest in their respective quarters, Kishiar led Yuder to his own room.

The top floor, where Kishiar resided, remained unchanged from three days prior. Walking past the magic stone stove, ablaze with colorful flames, and the Divine Sword Orr placed above it, Kishiar turned towards Nathan Zuckerman as they approached the sofa.

"Nathan, lock the door and bring the items I asked for this morning."

"Understood."

"Yuder, this way."

Kishiar, who had taken off his gold-buttoned military blue coat and rolled up his shirt sleeves, called out to Yuder without hesitation. Seeing him not only roll up his sleeves but also undo his cravat, Yuder began to doubt what he intended to do.

"What are you planning to do?"

"What else could I be doing?"

Kishiar retorted briefly and opened his mouth as he turned to Yuder.

"Aren't you undressing? Just rolling up the sleeves won't be enough to see how far the spot has spread."

"Ah, yes."

Yuder sat on the sofa and took off his uniform. As was the case yesterday, his undressing was considerably slower than usual due to the injuries on both hands. After failing to undo the buttons twice, Kishiar, who was watching, frowned as if he had realized something.

"Ah, I see. Both arms... Put your hands down, I'll help."

"I'm fine. I can do it myself."

"Do I have to order you even for such things?"

There was nothing he could do once the word 'order' was mentioned.