

Turning 261

Chapter 261

Suddenly, Lorna's expression turned peculiar as she unexpectedly came to understand the true reason why their respected leader had left his position in the council of Elders. Yuder was equally perplexed, uncertain how he should respond.

'...Didn't he say they were friends?'

Thais had confidently declared that Micalin, the head of the Western Mage Union, was his friend and would respond amicably when presented with the letter. However, the reaction of the recipient of the letter was unexpectedly different.

Indifferent to how the people around him were feeling, Micalin continued speaking, his eyes reflecting a memory from the past.

"Even the last time we met, we had a fight over our differences regarding the changing situation of magic power in the present time. We ended up in a fistfight, and I remember him shouting that the next time we'd meet would be at his funeral..."

"..."

At this point, it was clear that their relationship had moved beyond mere rivals and into the realm of enemies.

"...Yet, ironically, I owe my life to that man in a moment when I was on the brink of death."

Caught off guard by the sudden change in atmosphere, Yuder looked up. Micalin was watching him, a twisted smile on his face.

"In all my years, I have come to understand how unpredictable life truly is."

The old mage sighed deeply, gazing at the letter in his hand for a long time before folding it back.

"Did Thais say anything else when he sent this letter?"

"He was... worried about the Cavalry who were embarking on their first extermination mission. He said that once we arrived in the West, if we showed you the letter, you, as his friend, would help us," Yuder replied.

"Friend!"

Micalin laughed harshly, stroking his thick, bristly beard.

"Seems he's forgotten how badly we parted. Truly shameless, that man. Don't you agree?"

Faced with this question that seemed to demand agreement, Yuder hesitated before responding.

"...I think his passion for research is extraordinary."

"There's no need for such a polite phrase. It's sufficient to say that on the outside, he appears fine, but inside he's mad!"

With that final insult towards Thais Yulman, Micalin handed the letter back to Yuder.

"Now, take this back. I've confirmed its contents, so dispose of this cursed letter as you please. Burn it or return it, I don't care. Let's move on to something more important."

'...Does this mean he's finally willing to listen?'

While the exact reason wasn't clear, the fatigue and caution that had filled his gaze earlier seemed to have softened significantly. It appeared that Thais Yulman's letter had served its purpose in some way or another.

As Yuder contemplated the unpredictable nature of mages, he began to explain how he had met Lorna and her party in the village before coming here, and the conversation they'd had.

He emphasized that although the Tain Duke's family had requested the Cavalry's assistance, he had explicitly rejected it, and that they had come here to assess the situation and handle monster extermination independently of them. When he mentioned this, Micalin let out a low grunt of acknowledgment.

"So, the Cavalry has never actually met with Baron Willhem?"

"Correct. We were the first dispatched from the Cavalry and came straight here without visiting Tainu. If it weren't for Lorna, we wouldn't even have known about Baron Willhem."

"Did he really not know about the Magic Spring Ruin?"

"Our primary mission is to assess and handle any abnormalities in the monster population. If we truly were interested in the ruins, our Commander would have already contacted the Western Mage Union."

Micalin studied Yuder's impassive face, who carefully answered to ensure that he could fully feel that the mages were not the enemies of the Awakeners and the Cavalry but one of the citizens to protect.

"So...what is your evaluation of the current situation after the Cavalry has come this far?"

This was a question bordering on a test. Yuder instinctively felt that this was the turning point for the possibility of the Western Mage Union and the Cavalry directly collaborating.

"The boundaries are almost gone now. Thanks to the assistance provided so far, if well managed, this is a great opportunity to establish a cooperative relationship."

If he could get help from the mages who had been researching here for several years, handling the current situation would be incomparably easier than in his past life. He subtly moved his eyes to find Kishiar. The man, who stood quietly in a place that Yuder could find without any movement, nodded his head slightly enough that others would find it difficult to notice as soon as he met his gaze. It was the meaning of permission without even asking a question. Yuder smoothly continued his response.

"...Before we came here, I thought the situation might become much more serious than expected. If we take the slightly more severe monster emergence than in previous years lightly, we will certainly suffer great damage."

"Like our Western Mage Union stronghold did."

"Who could perfectly anticipate and handle such an event? The important thing is to find a way not to further increase the damage in the future."

"Good words. But how? Even if we ask for help from that Baron Willhem and the Duke of Tain, those slow guys are so stingy they will surely try to send support as late as possible. Do you think you can handle this situation with your power alone?"

"Of course, it would be difficult with our power alone. However, if the leader believes in us and helps us, it won't be impossible."

"Hmm. Do you see that much power in us? You surely don't mean we should take the lead and be the guide, considering all the damage we've taken."

There was always a sharp bone in Micalin's words. It was a deliberate act, a harsh response intended to minimize any potential harm to the union he led and to understand the intentions of Yuder and the Cavalry.

However, Yuder was very accustomed to this kind of response from his long time as a Cavalry Commander. If he were really a twenty-year-old boy, he might not have been able to resist those words, but he was not swayed by such blatant remarks now. The best way to not be swayed by such people was not to give them time to think and to calmly strike their weak spots.

"Right before the massive outbreak of monsters as we entered Great Sarain Forest today, we saw a strange crack in the air."

Micalin tilted his head towards Yuder, who suddenly brought up a different story.

"Hmm?"

"The crack from which the monsters usually emerged was entirely different this time. It was broader, a strange form that simply lingered in mid-air for quite a long time. Then, when it disappeared, monsters began to spawn at a rapid pace, most of them large creatures, twice the size of a human."

Micalin turned to look at Lorna as if to confirm this was true. She nodded seriously.

"His statement is true."

"I've never seen a crack like this before, and it was extremely ominous. To speak frankly, I... no, we speculated that this crack might somehow be connected to the unusual monster outbreak happening in the West."

"...Evidence?"

"None. However, wouldn't the Western Mage Union, who have been researching here for several years, perhaps know more about this crack in the air than us? There might be someone who has already seen it."

"..."

"No one knows when that crack might appear again. Perhaps it has already appeared nearby and disappeared again, causing more unusual occurrences. I believe that now is the time for quick judgments and cooperation rather than testing each other's intentions. That is, if we don't want to lose anything more important."

His words were audacious to an extreme degree. Micalin blinked, taken aback, then after a moment, let out a sound that was either laughter or amazement.

"Heh."

"If you, Leader, make a quick decision, our Cavalry will cooperate immediately. We hope you'll trust that our only aim is to solve this issue early and reduce the harm to the innocent citizens of the West."

Silence stretched on for a while. Yuder quietly stood, waiting for Micalin's answer. After a moment, Micalin, who had been lost in thought with his arms crossed, let out a loud, amused laugh.

"You've got guts. I thought you were just a child, but it seems I've been taught a lesson."

"..."

"Very well. Let's cooperate."

"Leader..."

The young mages behind Micalin could not hide their surprise.

"I don't like indecisive people. But as I grow older, I find myself becoming like them. Yet hearing such straightforward words after so long feels refreshing."

Micalin stepped forward, extending a hand towards Yuder.

"Let's shake on it again, properly this time."

His voice and gaze had changed, reflecting much more respect for his counterpart. Yuder shook Micalin's hand. After a firm handshake, Micalin spoke immediately.

"About that crack you mentioned last... it so happens that one of our mages also reported witnessing something similar near an artifact we were researching. I didn't pay it much attention at the time due to the chaos, but hearing you speak of it reminded me. Would you like to meet him and hear the story?"

"Really?"

Yuder nodded instantly.

"I'd like to hear it right away, if possible."

The artifact, the strange crack, signs of a looming disaster.

Noticing Yuder's mind whirling with these thoughts, Micalin shot him a meaningful glance.

"He's likely resting in another room due to his injuries. Follow me."

Chapter 262

For the sake of the patient's stability, Micalin allowed no one other than himself and Yuder to follow. Yuder shot a glance toward Kishiar, then followed Micalin directly up to the upper floors.

Inside the room they entered, following a corridor cluttered with broken items, several wounded mages lay asleep.

"These are the ones who were injured at dawn. I put them to sleep with magic for a quick recovery."

With that explanation, Micalin moved towards the innermost bed. As he gently touched the shoulder of a sleeping mage, the man slowly opened his eyes.

"Leader... are you here?"

"Yes, Skelly. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I apologize for causing you concern and being unable to help....."

"The wounded needn't trouble themselves with unnecessary thoughts."

At Micalin's response, the mage called Skelly sighed.

"How can I not, knowing everyone is injured and struggling. But who is that behind you... I seem to see a new face."

To the young mage's anxious and defensive gaze towards Yuder, Micalin extended a reassuring hand.

"He's a collaborator who agreed to help overcome this situation. Just listen to our conversation, no need to worry."

"A collaborator?"

"Yes, Skelly. Actually, the reason I came to see you today is to hear more about the crack in the air phenomenon you mentioned yesterday. Do you remember what you said then?"

At Micalin's words, Skelly widened his eyes.

"If you mean the one I saw at the ruins... Wasn't it concluded that I was just being overly sensitive?"

"It was. But I thought that it might not be a false alarm."

"Pardon?"

"The crack you saw appeared again today. So, I thought we should revisit your account."

The mage, his arm bandaged, alternated his gaze between Micalin and Yuder, then slowly sat up.

"If that's the case... I understand. It was too strange to simply dismiss as a figment. I'll tell you everything I remember."

Skelly began to slowly recount the previous day's events.

"It was in the afternoon when I went to do my shift at the ruins. Gemma and Shail were repairing the barrier, and I was monitoring the changes in the distribution of magic power. It had definitely increased compared to a few days ago. While I was recording that, something strange caught my eye. At first, I thought it was the shadow of a tree, but upon closer inspection, it was a long crack that had appeared in thin air."

The crack that Skelly described was almost identical to what Yuder had seen.

'So, it wasn't the first time it appeared today.'

The crack witnessed before the disaster in his previous life wasn't a one-time occurrence. During the earthquake in the south, more than ten witnesses claimed to have seen something similar to the crack in different areas on different dates.

While not all of their statements might have been true, even the number of witnesses found after the incident suggested the possibility that cracks might have appeared and disappeared without anyone noticing.

Tracking the crack alone was difficult, so he had left it as a hypothesis. Now, knowing the truth quickened his heartbeat.

"Fearing a monster might emerge, I had hurried off to summon Gemma and Shail, but by the time I returned, the crack had vanished. Gemma speculated I might have seen an illusion. Shail too suggested that some had been seeing such illusions at the ruins recently and advised me to take a break from research for a while. I had agreed, but just in case, I reported it to the Leader."

However, Micalin, upon hearing Skelly's report at that time, did not take the matter too seriously. It was common for mages, weary from long research, to occasionally see things. And not long after, the surprise attack by monsters that appeared with the darkness of night had robbed them of all leisure, and the story of the strange crack in the air soon faded from their minds.

"Thanks for telling me. Now rest a bit more."

After speaking, Micalin put the weary Skelly back to sleep and looked back at Yuder.

"What do you think?"

"It seems that the crack he saw is not much different from what I've seen."

"So, there is indeed a connection between these phenomena..."

Micalin frowned and fell into thought. Yuder, watching his expression, hesitantly spoke up.

"You just mentioned that there were mages who have seen illusions at the ruins recently, could it be possible that these illusions include such cracks?"

"Hmm, I knew that the number of people seeing illusions had increased, but I assumed it was due to the strain of recent advances in research."

Yet, Micalin fell silent, seemingly considering the point valid.

"We should look into it."

They headed back down the stairs. Yuder followed Micalin, mentally preparing what he would report back to the party.

"Leader, have you finished speaking with Skelly?"

"Yes, it seems what he saw was the same phenomenon as the strange crack that appeared today."

At Micalin's brief explanation, everyone gasped.

"So, ..."

"Although you're all busy with cleaning up the site, there's something you need to investigate immediately."

Micalin gave orders to the mages under him, including Lorna.

"Weren't there quite a few who claimed they saw illusions while exploring the ruins recently? Ask them what they saw, where they saw it, and if they felt anything strange at the time. Anything they can remember, even vaguely."

The mages nodded solemnly.

"Understood."

It didn't take them long to find answers. The responses they gathered while circling around were astonishing.

"It seems like two really saw illusions, while about half a dozen saw something like a crack in the air that could be mistaken for a shadow, like Skelly did. If we include those who are currently out in the village or those in the western base, the number may even increase."

The mages who had retrieved the answers also looked surprised, as if they hadn't expected such a result. The expression on Micalin, their Leader, grew even more grave.

"...So, did you also find out when this was first seen?"

"It's not certain, but among those present here, the first one to see it... it seems like at least a month ago. At the time, it appeared very briefly and vanished, startling them with the thought of a possible monster appearance, but when nothing happened, they soon forgot about it."

"Was it also near the ruins?"

"Yes."

Micalin, who seemed dumbfounded, raised his voice toward the mages.

"But how did not a single one of you think to pay attention to this until now? You should have reported to Tainu immediately!"

"I-I apologize."

"No... no, it's not your fault. It's probably because we've been constantly moving between Tainu and the Great Sarain Forest, with no one consistently staying put. Even I have not visited in the past few months, so who can I blame?"

Micalin, tucking back his tousled hair, turned his keen, saffron-colored eyes towards Yuder.

"It seems we, who claimed to be in pursuit of truth, have turned a blind eye to the phenomenon that was already unfolding. We've shown a shameful image."

"That's not true."

"About a month ago, coincidentally, significant changes in the distribution of magic power were observed at the ruins we were studying. It seems highly likely there's some sort of connection, but... right now, due to the crisis, it's difficult to go there."

"Then could you at least explain a bit more about what you were studying at the Magic Spring Ruins? I'm not sure what you mean by a change in the distribution of magic power, but if I understand what it is, it might help."

"Well..."

Micalin looked thoughtfully at Yuder and the rest of the Cavalry, struggling with what to say. Even though they had decided to cooperate, discussing the details of the research was obviously causing him some consternation.

However, he quickly made his decision.

"Have you ever heard that the number of mages entering the Pearl Tower every year is dwindling?"

The words, heavily uttered by the old mage, made all the Cavalry blink in unison. Yuder had vaguely heard about the issue in his previous life, but feigned ignorance for the moment.

"I think I've heard something about it... but I'm not quite sure."

"Among us mages, this has been one of the big problems that have been going on for at least several hundred years. Especially in the past few decades, it has gotten worse. There are even rumors that at this rate, mages might disappear altogether."

"..."

"The only reason why the number of mages is dwindling and the number of those who can't use offensive magic is increasing is simple. The magic power in this world is slowly thinning."

Upon hearing Micalin's direct explanation, the expressions of the mages standing behind them darkened.

"We were excavating the Magic Spring Ruins to find a solution to this. Although, by now, even the Pearl Tower doesn't have much hope for our research."

The research was on a much larger scale than Yuder had anticipated. As he listened to the complex explanations that followed, he tried to recall what the mages of the Western Mage Union had previously said about the Magic Spring.

Kishiar had told the Cavalry that there was a legend that the earliest mages drew their power from the Magic Spring. It seemed that the mages of the Western Mage Union had been excavating ruins presumed to be this Magic Spring in an attempt to find a way to restore their power.

'It's unclear whether the ruins they discovered really are the Magic Spring or where it once existed... But it's certain that, even unknowingly, more magic power has pooled there than anywhere else. Just like the mountain range where the Red Stone was found.'

Yuder didn't know much about magic, but thankfully, he now had Kishiar, who was knowledgeable on the subject, with him. When he subtly shifted his gaze, he saw the tall man still standing motionless, showing no reaction. He was fully focused, not missing a word of Micalin's explanation.

The mere thought that he didn't have to find the answers on his own made him feel significantly better.

Chapter 263

"Leader, my apologies for interrupting your conversation. Regarding the tasks you've ordered, there are too many things that require your personal attention and decisions. It seems we can no longer afford to delay..."

"Ah, this has gone on longer than I anticipated."

At the request of the young mage who had interrupted his discussion about their research, Micalin abruptly rose from his seat.

"I understand you all need rest after battle, but given the circumstances, it has been hectic. We will step out for a while. Please take this opportunity to rest and discuss the details of our cooperation. As you said, we don't have time to waste."

"Understood."

After Micalin and the mage hurriedly exited, the members of the Cavalry who had been holding their tongues began to vent their complaints.

"My back and shoulders are killing me."

"That's to be expected after all the fighting we've done. You should rest and loosen up those muscles."

"That leader sure gives off an intense impression. Whew. Just standing in front of him makes me tense."

As the members checked on each other's condition, Yuder silently turned his gaze toward Kishiar. The man, who had been keeping a low profile until now, approached in response to his gaze and quietly opened his mouth.

"I didn't expect we'd be forming an alliance so quickly, but it's something that had to be done, so it's good that it happened."

"...Yes."

Yuder, looking at him, cautiously added.

"I was worried that I might be acting contrary to your wishes, Commander. I am relieved if that is not the case."

"Why would it be?"

Kishiar, with a candid reply, soon softened his tone.

"It's natural not to miss an opportunity waving in front of your eyes. At one point, I even mistook you for Kanna Wand."

"I wasn't that..."

"Don't be so modest."

Whether Kishiar's compliment, which may or may not have been fortunate for Kanna, who was in conversation with other members, made Yuder's response tremble, Kishiar silently chuckled. It seemed almost fantastical how Yuder once muttered that being too competent could also be problematic.

"So, how should I praise you then?"

"You don't have to, just focus on the cooperative plan that Micalin mentioned."

"No, good work should be praised. That's a priority."

Kishiar, who had been muttering about how to do it, reached out to Yuder a moment later. Yuder initially thought he was going to ruffle his hair again, but instead, Kishiar's hand skimmed past his ear and lightly patted his shoulder before pulling away.

"You must have had a hard time dealing with this alone, but you did well. Thanks to you, the rest of our dispatched forces will have an easier time here."

"..."

Yuder rarely felt such deep embarrassment. It was obvious he wouldn't touch his head in such a public place, but he had lost some objective judgment due to Kishiar's numerous spontaneous behaviors.

"That aside, the last bit of research discussion was quite interesting. I can hardly believe I was oblivious to it until now."

The man, oblivious to Yuder's internal struggle, smoothly shifted the topic. Yuder, calming the turmoil in his chest, recalled the last bits of the research discussion before Micalin left. Soon, he was able to regain his composure.

"I had little knowledge of magic, so many aspects were difficult to comprehend. Commander, have you grasped everything?"

"As much as necessary."

The fact that he had comprehended the complex magic research that Micalin had hurriedly explained was impressive in and of itself. Kishiar, who had been silent, seeming to contemplate how to explain further, continued after a moment.

"In simple terms, they discovered a place within this forest where magic energy is densely concentrated. They have attempted to induce change there over several years. Until recently, there was no sign of progress, but they've started seeing changes and were hoping to regain support from the Pearl Tower..."

Though Kishiar's explanation was much more succinct than Micalin's, it was still difficult to fully understand.

Nevertheless, the critical point was singular. Western Mage Union had observed phenomena that suggested an impending disaster several times, unbeknownst to even them, and changes began to occur in the subjects of their research around the same time.

'I had thought that there was only a connection between the strange cracks in the air and the monster's anomalies, but now there's the alteration of the ruins the mages were researching...'

The moment when changes in the ruins were detected, the time when the cracks were first observed, and when monsters in the West began to act unusually. Could these coinciding events be a mere coincidence?

'To find the answer, I need to investigate these ruins more closely.'

The Magic Spring in the ruins, which was not considered important at first, might have been the most critical factor in this case. This was merely speculation at this point and could be wrong, but even the thought was startling.

Being more cautious than ever, Yuder asked Kishiar a question.

"Commander, do you think the changes in the ruins could be related to the anomalies with the monsters...or the strange crack we saw earlier?"

"Well, just because events overlap in timing does not necessarily mean they are related. But..."

Kishiar paused midway through his response. His gaze, from beneath his thick hat, scanned over Yuder's face, more serious than ever.

"...It seems my assistant already thinks so. Don't you?"

For a moment, Yuder felt as if his inner thoughts had been precisely pricked. His eyelid twitched slightly.

"Wouldn't your judgment be more accurate than mine, Commander?"

"I find your eyes and your judgment more trustworthy."

Kishiar responded as if it were nothing, left a brief pause, and rubbed his chin as he continued.

"Anyway, if you really want to hear my answer, yes. I, too, feel the need to investigate the changes at the ruins site more closely."

"Really?"

"Of course, not right now."

Kishiar gave a clear answer and slightly turned his head. Following his gaze, Yuder turned to see the back of Prince Ejain, who was conversing with the Cavalry members, and narrowed his eyes.

"We can proceed with specific cooperation with the mages after the second dispatch arrives. Until then, we need to finish what we must do now. We can't delay our priorities."

"..."

The original plan was to immediately deliver the letter upon visiting the stronghold of the mages within the Great Sarain Forest, and promptly depart. However, due to the unforeseen outbreak of monsters, they were caught up in continuous battles, and much of the day had already been consumed.

"I understand. We can't afford to waste any more time here. ...So, should I tell Mikalin that we will proceed with detailed discussions later, and leave a brief oath in writing?"

How could they guarantee that the minds of the mages wouldn't change in the time it took them to escort Prince Ejain to his destination and return? In order to maintain their mutual agreement to cooperate, a tangible assurance was needed. An oath, the most common form of guarantee, was proposed with this intent, but Kishiar immediately shook his head.

"No, there's a far more reliable option. We can leave some of our party here, including Priest Lusan, and go."

"Excuse me?"

At the unexpected suggestion, his eyes widened, and Kishiar spoke unabashedly.

"There are many here who need treatment. The mages currently need the power of a priest more than anyone else, and they could use help defending this place, if possible. Isn't it more trustworthy to leave people who can actually help here, instead of depending on mere words?"

'...That is definitely a good point.'

It was a reasonable suggestion. The Cavalry members were exceptional in their abilities, so even if they left a few here while taking Prince Ejain to his destination, there would be no issue in fulfilling their mission. However, in the Western Mage Union filled with injured, any remaining strength would be desperately needed.

'Even if I was the only one left with Prince Ejain, there would be no chance of him dying or getting hurt.'

After making a cool judgment, Yuder soon nodded his head, expressing his agreement.

"I understand. Then who are you thinking of leaving behind?"

"Who do you think?"

"Um..."

Would it be Kanna, who could quickly gather the most honest information among the mages? Or perhaps it could be Gakane, who was naturally attractive and friendly enough to lower others' guards and possessed enough skill to handle the monsters.

The Eldore siblings, who excel at evacuating others in emergencies, would also be suitable. Emun, with his peculiar ability to hide targets in darkness from the gaze of enemies or monsters, wasn't a bad choice either.

'Although the chance of leaving Emun, whose ability I've chosen to initially hide and protect Prince Ejain in case of emergencies, might be low...'

"Is it really something that requires such deep thought?"

While Yuder was deep in thought, Kishiar questioned him with a tone implying he should've known by now.

"Is it Kanna?"

"No."

"Then it must be Gakane."

"No, not him either."

"Then..."

"Neither Hinn Eldore nor Finn Eldore."

Watching Kishiar predict and answer his queries, Yuder suddenly thought of a possibility he hadn't considered.

'...Wait. Could it be?'

"Could it be... me?"

Chapter 264

"Surely... you can't mean me?"

"..."

In response to his question, Kishiar's lips curved in what was, thus far, the most complex expression of emotion.

Yuder fell silent, at a loss for words. This made no sense. He wanted to believe he had misunderstood, but Kishiar's gaze left no room for error, it clearly indicated that he had chosen Yuder.

"Is this because of the peculiarity of my abilities?"

The voice that emerged after a considerable pause was the most rigid and coarse it had ever been.

"I recall clearly that I assured you my abilities would not hinder the mission."

"Indeed, you did."

"Then why me... No, I beg you to reconsider. My presence here would be far less helpful than by the side of the Commander and the others. I request that you consider which would truly be best."

Kishiar didn't know how badly this mission could turn if handled improperly. In his previous life, numerous members, including Gakane, perished during a subjugation mission. If the monster's abnormality exceeded their capacity to handle, Kishiar might experience another crisis. Adding to that, there was a chance that Prince Ejain may not return to his homeland alive.

Without him, how could all these possibilities be mitigated? Merely imagining all the bad things that could happen without him there, Yuder's heart tightened and his pulse quickened tremendously.

"No matter how many times I think about it, my conclusion doesn't change. This is the best course of action, as I see it."

Yet Kishiar's voice remained infuriatingly calm.

"But I don't know much about magic."

"Knowing or not won't make much of a difference."

"Wouldn't it be better if you and Kanna stayed together instead? The mages will never let their guard down around me."

"Even after you just spectacularly broke down Micalin Punt's guard, you're saying this?"

Yuder knew that he could never outtalk Kishiar, but never before had this fact been so frustrating. Grinding his teeth, he mumbled at Kishiar.

"I can't sit by idly while something might happen to the Commander or my comrades in my absence. I am not that submissive."

At that, Kishiar let out a short laugh. Without seeing his eyes, it was hard to gauge his emotions, but the laugh was oddly sweet, ill-suited to the situation.

"What if I wanted you to do exactly that?"

"..."

It was an unbelievable request, but incredibly, Yuder's protest lost its force before that smile. He attempted to speak a few times, but his mouth was immobile as if it had been struck in a vital spot. To suppress his churning emotions, Yuder bit his lip and lowered his gaze.

And as if he had been waiting for that moment, Kishiar's lips moved slightly.

"The one who can become the sign of the greatest faith to the mages, the one who is confident to protect the many here and priest Lusan alone, and the one who can perceive something extraordinary amidst the events here. There is only one person who can do that. Yuder Aile."

Only you.

In this world, there was only one man who could command Yuder Aile, and that man, now more than ever, called his name with a clear intention. His gaze gently swept across Yuder's face, heavy with anxiety. At first glance, his eyes appeared calm and composed, but Yuder then realized that the fragments of emotion hidden within did not reflect the same tranquility.

"Remember the version of yourself that agreed to leave someone here, because you trust the abilities of your companions."

The statement hit Yuder like a splash of cold water. As Yuder's face twisted slightly, Kishiar offered his final compromise with a soft voice.

"Three days. Endure for just three days. If we don't return within that period, you're allowed to act freely."

It was a statement akin to a final notice. Yuder was forced to accept the fact that he could no longer persuade Kishiar.

"Leave Yuder and Priest Lusan here, and just us proceed?"

Kishiar, having made the decision, immediately informed the rest of the group. The members appeared surprised but soon accepted Kishiar's decision. No one seemed overly scared by the fact that Yuder was not accompanying them.

Upon finishing his business and returning, Yuder tried not to let his anxiety show as he relayed the same information to Micalin. Fortunately, whether his efforts paid off or not, the old mage didn't find anything odd about his expression.

"Hmm. If there was another mission that needed attention, then it can't be helped. But to venture back into the Great Sarain Forest with just a handful of people during this time... Are you sure it's a good idea?"

"...It's fine."

Yuder's eyes were darker than ever as he responded, as if engraving the promised three-day period into his mind.

"You certainly have unparalleled confidence in your abilities. I'm sorry I can't be of much help, given our circumstances."

"Your words alone are more than enough for me to feel gratitude."

"Then let's leave the details of our cooperation for when your group returns, and if you need anything before your group departs, feel free to ask the passing mages."

Priest Lusan was slightly surprised by the fact that only he and Yuder were left while the others headed toward their destination. However, he quietly expressed gratitude towards Kishiar. For him, it was more rewarding to stay by the side of those who needed his divine power than to laboriously move within the Great Sarain Forest.

"Let's have a quick chat."

During the brief preparation period before heading back into the Great Sarain Forest, Yuder followed Ejain, who had discreetly called him outside.

"I didn't expect things to turn out this way."

"... Yes, I didn't either."

While Yuder thought he knew Kishiar well - a man as unpredictable as a chameleon - he had only seen the man's lively and gentle side in this lifetime, and thus, didn't expect such a blow. After hearing Yuder's response, Ejain fell into a brief silence, tilted his head, and asked in a soft voice.

"So, is this the last time we'll see each other?"

"I suppose it is."

"Life really makes it hard to predict even a step ahead. This situation made me realize that more than ever."

"..."

"But for some reason, this time, it wasn't entirely unpleasant. Perhaps because I've seen and heard many things in a short time that I hadn't considered before."

Taken aback by the unexpected statement, Yuder lifted his head towards Ejain. All he could see was a portion of the long silver hair that spilled from under the large hat, but he could nonetheless sense that Ejain's voice had transformed into a surprising calm compared to a few days ago.

"However, contrary to your advice, what I learned was not from observing others. The true key, as always, lies beside the door."

Puzzled by the cryptic statement, he lapsed into silence, but Ejain did not immediately offer any explanation.

"It's a pity. I wanted to watch you a bit longer."

"Thank you for your kind regard."

"It's not flattery. You've given me something even the best teachers could not."

It seemed like a suggestion to learn how to keep good talent by observing Kishiar, but somehow the young prince's conclusion seemed to return and settle again on an interest in Yuder.

"Please save those words for when you have truly obtained what you desire after your departure, and share them with those who follow you."

"I wonder if that day will come. Do you think it's really possible?"

The jocular, yet humorless question pierced his ears. Yuder imagined Ejain's expression, hidden under the hat. Likely he was wearing the bitter expression he had seen by the well on that rainy night.

'But something has definitely changed since then.'

The Ejain of that day seemed wrapped in self-loathing, without the inclination to observe his surroundings. But now, he seemed to have regained a leisurely state, longing purely for something other than power.

"Do you remember what I said to you before?"

"..."

"With the Cavalry, you will surely be able to return safely to where you wish. And then, one day, the opportunity you desire will certainly come. Please do not forget the words I've given you then."

"The opportunity I desire."

Ejain muttered quietly.

"A few days ago, I would've thought that opportunity would be absolute power or strength... Strangely enough, now, I don't feel so good about thinking that way."

Maybe that's what he was trying to tell him. He still didn't fully understand it, though.

The prince murmured such and looked up at the sky.

"If it's alright, I'd like to consider you a close friend. Would you permit me?"

That was the most unexpected question he had heard since meeting Ejain in this lifetime.

In his previous life, he had wished to return something to the one who had given him a final opportunity in any way he could, but he had not expected to hear these words.

Chapter 265

Even the shocking fact that Kishiar had decided to leave him behind momentarily vanished from his mind as he, Yuder, opened his mouth carefully.

"I feel I may not be someone fit to be your close friend... May I ask why you think otherwise?"

"The only way that occurred to me to forge a bond without a transaction was that."

Prince Ejain responded concisely.

"You're from the Empire, and you've no intention of leaving the Cavalry. If we part ways now and happen to meet again someday, you'll likely not even bother to recognize me. Isn't that so?"

He wanted to ask how he knew so much about him to make such a claim, but to be frank, Prince Ejain wasn't wrong. He had no plans to leave the Cavalry, nor to bring up their current encounter should they meet again someday.

Watching Yuder respond in silence, Ejain let out a faint smile.

"There aren't many relationships that can be formed and maintained despite differences in status, location, age, and everything else. A lover or a friend. That's about it. I want to hold onto the hope that, after surviving and returning safely to my home country, I can casually resume our relationship when I meet you again someday. That's why I've chosen to be friends. Does this answer your question?"

'Hope.'

Yuder felt an odd sensation from the last word mentioned in his lengthy speech. Hope is an anticipation for the future. The future was the most valuable asset Yuder had reclaimed after living an entire life and coming back.

He vividly remembered the joy he felt at the moment he realized he'd reclaimed his future and hope. As his gaze wavered slightly, Ejain continued speaking.

"You taught me that you can't get what you want by staying as you are. If I've forced someone to change by making them feel destiny beyond luck, then I should share the responsibility."

'It doesn't seem like giving advice should imply responsibility...'

Anyway, it seemed like even Prince Ejain needed hope, no matter what form it took.

What remained for a prince who had lost all his followers and whose life was under threat was a slender hope for the future. Yuder knew he would make it, but he couldn't help thinking that the prince might need a concrete, new hope to keep moving forward.

'Yes. After all, I intended to help... For changing the future, maintaining a good relationship with Prince Ejain and Nelarn would be necessary.'

In truth, if it was revealed that he'd proposed to be friends with someone like Yuder, the one who stood to lose was unequivocally Prince Ejain. Aside from the somewhat peculiar Kishiar, most of the imperial family members and noble class only established such relationships out of necessity. Despite knowing this, the fact that the royal Ejain humbled himself to propose friendship to a common-born Cavalry member would undoubtedly make others think the prince had lost his mind.

'Like Kishiar...'

What if Ejain, who seemed to be changing in a slightly different direction than his past life, became a somewhat peculiar royal, showing similarities to Kishiar? Even if he may not be hailed as a perfect king as he was in his previous life, wouldn't it be better for him?

After a thin sigh, Yuder opened his mouth to answer the waiting prince.

"Understood."

"Really? You can't back down."

It was a relationship where he didn't know when he would see him again. What was this thing that kept him tethered? When Yuder nodded, a brighter smile than the one he had seen at first sight bloomed on Ejain's lips.

"I am delighted to have made a great friend. It is the best harvest I have acquired since coming to this Empire. In fact, even in Nelarn, I have never asked anyone to be my friend first. So, even if my approach is clumsy, I hope you, with many friends, will consider it."

It was a shocking thing to hear. It was the first time in two lives that he had been told he seemed to have many friends. He thought it was a joke, but Prince Ejain's expression felt sincere.

'Maybe I, as seen through others' eyes, have changed a lot from before...'

Swallowing a strange feeling of unfamiliarity with himself, Yuder observed Prince Ejain, who looked much happier than expected. It was a strange sight, someone wanting to be his friend and showing joy that it was accepted.

"I didn't know you would be so happy."

"Of course, I'm happy. I mentioned it considering the possibility that it might not work out until the end."

"If I had refused till the end, would you have accepted it?"

"Hmm. At that time... I would have tried to take advantage of being a friend."

'Advantage?'

He wondered what that meant, but the next answer that flowed out was quite a spectacle.

"You know that one can't be lovers alone, but friends can be?"

"Excuse me?"

"Even if you said no, you're already my friend. If you had refused, I would have been a friend on my own."

"What are you..."

Facing Yuder, who was speechless at what seemed like nonsense, Prince Ejain flashed a refreshing smile.

"If you ever come to Nelarn, make sure to find me. I will treat you with all the courtesies befitting a friend."

"...Understood."

He wondered if such a day would ever come, but for now, he replied affirmatively. Prince Ejain extended his hand with a peculiar expression.

"Then let's shake hands one last time. We're friends."

"..."

Yuder slowly reached out and shook hands with Ejain. The tight grip and smiling lips felt entirely different from the emotionless face of the young King who had greeted the Commander of the Cavalry in his previous life.

Not long after, all the Cavalry members had finished their preparations and stood in front of the path to return to the Great Sarain Forest. From afar, the mages of the Western Mage Union were still busy with their site rebuilding, and Yuder watched the figures of his companions who he should be bidding farewell.

He felt like he could walk with them right now, but the fact that he had to let them go made him feel frustrated.

"Yuder. We'll be back soon. Take care."

"Don't worry too much!"

The members, unaware of Yuder's feelings, patted his shoulders with bright faces, but all that increased were unpleasant imaginations.

And finally, Kishiar stood in front of him. He sent a cold gaze toward the face hidden beneath the cloak and hat, and the attractive lips showed a difficult expression and slightly lifted.

"Hmm... I see you're still not convinced."

Of course not. Unless he suddenly became Kishiar, how could he genuinely accept this situation? It was excessive to ask for acceptance, though understanding why he had decided to leave him behind was possible.

When Yuder did not respond, the smile on Kishiar's face deepened.

"But somehow... I find it rather pleasant to be worried about so sincerely."

"..."

Yes, this was how Kishiar La Orr had always been. Yuder repeated this fact in his mind about ten times, suppressing the swell of emotions. It had been so long since he'd felt this way that it evoked memories of a time shortly after he'd joined the Cavalry in his previous life.

"So, my assistant finally seems his age. How adorable."

"I haven't done anything, but there must be many things you find cute."

"Hahaha."

Laughing, Kishiar slipped something into the pocket of Yuder's overcoat and turned away.

"I'll see you again in three days. Watch over Priest Lusan and the others well."

Yuder put his hand in his pocket and lightly examined the object that had been inserted.

"This is..."

The item that Kishiar had slipped in was none other than the candy he'd been forced to accept a few days ago. But this time, it wasn't just one piece - there were three.

Yuder held his breath as he looked down at the three colorful candy wrappers rolling around in his palm, then up at the sky. He felt a mix of absurd emotions and a strange queasiness, as if he couldn't maintain his composure unless he did so.

"Commander."

The only man who could hear his whisper-like call turned his head in response. Yuder watched him quietly for a moment, then lowered his eyes.

"If you return even slightly injured, I will never listen to such an order again."

"..."

"Please be careful."

Kishiar's face was obscured by his hat and his expression was unreadable. He stood still for a moment as if pricked by Yuder's words. Only after someone else called out to him did he turn and follow his companions.

The densely grown trees of the Great Sarain Forest quickly swallowed their figures. Even after they had completely disappeared from view, Yuder remained in place for a long time.

Strictly speaking, he was not alone, yet strangely, his heart had grown cold. It was as if winter had come to him alone, a familiar yet disconcerting sensation.

Yuder realized a little late that this sensation was something he always used to harbor in his previous life.

"You're going to help with this? Can you do it?"

"Yes. It's just a matter of rebuilding the roof, isn't it?"

After his companions had left, Yuder began to help the mages repair the collapsed buildings. The mages, who had been half in doubt, were astounded at Yuder's abilities.

Chapter 266

"How should we deal with this leaning pillar?"

"Ah. We planned to remove it, since straightening it seems difficult..."

"If you prefer to straighten it, I can make that happen."

"Really?"

To someone who could harness the power of the earth, such a task was far from difficult. Yuder straightened the leaning pillar in no time, right in front of the astonished mage, driving it deeply back into the ground.

"Is there anything else to do?"

The mage, who had been staring at the now straight pillar, awkwardly nodded, his expression much softer than before.

"Ah... No. We're finished here. If you still have energy, perhaps you should head that way..."

"Understood."

Even without a word of thanks, Yuder turned around without a care, attracting varied emotional gazes from the mages. The news that Micalin, the leader, had misunderstood the Cavalry and decided to cooperate, and that the mages who had been brought to the base with the help of the Cavalry had accepted them, didn't completely erase the residual hostility. However, Yuder made no forced attempts to mollify these feelings.

If people with friendly characters like Gakane and Kanna were here, they might have already become close. However, Yuder knew better than anyone that he could not be like them. He simply did what he could at the moment.

However, such demeanor surprisingly drew a not-so-bad response from the mages. His calm demeanor, despite having performed miracles single-handedly, was extremely peculiar and intriguing.

Constant, secretive glances filled with curiosity were thrown at the Cavalry member, who seemed like a drop of oil on water.

"Sir Aile. They say that the restoration of the magic circle is almost complete. We're about to have dinner, would you like to join us?"

Yuder, who was about to bury the debris under the ground, looked up at the calling gaze. Lorna, the mage who had been with him from the village in the western border region, and her colleagues stood not far away. Looking around, it seemed that the other mages had already gone to have their meal.

"No, I'm good."

"I understand that it may be difficult for you to eat since your companions have left, but starving isn't good for your health. You've worked hard all day, let's eat together."

Another mage standing beside Lorna chimed in, his face full of resolve.

"That's right. If the person who did the most work today goes hungry, it would be a disgrace to the name of the Western Mage Union."

Yuder stared at their faces for a moment. It seemed like these mages had gathered here out of worry for him being left alone.

It wasn't that he had trouble eating since his companions had left, he just avoided joining the others because he knew it would cool the atmosphere during mealtime. However, the mages, who tried to look after him through their short bond formed from traversing the Great Sarain Forest together, didn't seem all that bad, despite the awkwardness.

"In that case... alright."

"That's great. You've made a good decision."

The mages' faces brightened up at Yuder's consent. They surrounded Yuder and headed to the place where the mages were dining. As soon as the other mages, who were eating their dry bread and soup with tired faces, saw him, they closed their mouths and fell silent. The gazes pouring on his face were unbearably sharp.

"Um... If you would remain here, we shall bring enough food for your party, Sir Aile. Would that be acceptable?"

"Yes."

The companions who had come with him, Lorna and the mages from the village, looked at Yuder with somewhat uncomfortable expressions, but he paid them no mind. After all, this was something he had expected since they decided to have a meal together. He sat down and nonchalantly bit into the bread the mages had brought for him. As Yuder continued to eat undisturbed, seemingly oblivious to their gazes, the mages gradually returned to their normal demeanor.

Only when the silence had been replaced by the sound of casual conversation did Lorna, who had been holding her breath in relief, cautiously speak to Yuder.

"You've really helped us a lot today. Wasn't it exhausting?"

"It wasn't too much."

At Yuder's comment about not handling 'too much' despite having done over half of the work alone, the mages exchanged glances.

"So... you're saying it was just not... 'too much'..."

Their words trailed off rapidly. However, the silence didn't last long. One of the mages, who had been eating quietly for a while, eventually couldn't contain his curiosity and asked Yuder a question.

"Sir, there's something I've been curious about ever since we learned you guys are part of the Cavalry from the village. Can I ask you about it now?"

"If I can answer, I will."

As soon as Yuder nodded, a flood of questions poured out.

"Do Awakeners typically possess power equivalent to yours or your companions?"

"When you use your power, it seems like there's no need for preparation at all. What does it feel like to use it?"

"Exactly what abilities do you have and what can you do with them?"

Too many questions were asked for him to answer them all, but Yuder tried to respond as concisely as he could.

"The abilities we have vary greatly from one individual to another, so a direct comparison isn't easy. But I believe that the things I have done today are well within the abilities of my comrades. Using power feels like energy is being drained from my entire body. There are even people who bleed from their noses if they overdo it. I can't explain all about my abilities, but according to the classification system within the Cavalry..."

Upon receiving answers, the mages' faces brightened.

"I see. That's truly fascinating."

"It seems completely different from how we use magic."

"If we go by what you say, doesn't it rather resemble the original form of magic usage, as recorded in the ancient texts?"

As the mages started a heated discussion based on Yuder's answers, other mages who had been secretly eavesdropping couldn't resist subtly joining in.

"Um, can I ask something too?"

"...Go ahead."

"Well, earlier, while we were cleaning up the debris..."

The barrage of questions continued even as the soup cooled and the bread hardened to the point of being inedible. If Lorna hadn't noticed the sun had completely set outside the window and put a stop to it, Yuder would have had to answer their questions indefinitely.

"I'm sorry. Many of our mages can't help but ask when they are curious... they don't know when to stop."

After finally escaping after a while, Lorna apologized to Yuder with a regretful expression.

"It's okay. I'm somewhat used to the passionate nature of mages."

He did think the young mages' enthusiasm was remarkable, but he wasn't tired or uncomfortable. Compared to what Thais Yulman had shown him in the Cavalry, this was nothing.

As he responded, Lorna's eyes widened, seemingly recalling something she had heard beside Micalin.

"Oh, that's right. You mentioned that Thais Yulman is currently in the Cavalry."

"Yes."

"When I quoted from the research records for my personal study, I referred to his papers quite a lot. But I've never met him in person. Have you seen him often, Sir Aile?"

Although he hadn't seen him every day, he had made regular visits with Kanna to see Thais, so he could say that they had met frequently. As Yuder gave a slight nod, Lorna's gaze swirled with curiosity and other emotions.

"Do you plan to help us out again tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"I see. Since we received so much help from you today, more than we could possibly articulate, we should try to assist you where you need it tomorrow."

Her statement held a somewhat suggestive undertone for something spoken simply out of gratitude. Upon Yuder's sharp glance, Lorna tilted her head slightly and smiled.

"Thanks to the swift completion of today's tasks, it seems we can return to the sites we've set aside for research tomorrow. Including the ruins."

Yuder did not miss the slight shift in Lorna's expression as she mentioned the 'ruins'.

"The leader also said to assist you in any way possible. Think about it and have a good rest."

Yuder watched her retreating figure before entering his lodgings. The quarters provided by the mages were the cleanest and most organized, apparently prepared with guests in mind.

There were two beds, one for each of them, but Priest Lusan was nowhere to be seen, likely still tending to the wounded. Rather than sit on the bed, Yuder walked towards the window, where darkness had fallen. Not far off, the sound of trees rustling in the wind, their leaves and branches moaning, filled the air.

The day had gone better than expected. The thought of possibly visiting the ruins the next day should have excited him, yet his heart remained as cold as the dark forest outside.

Could his comrades hear this cold and eerie sound as well?

If they could, where might they be listening from?

And what about Kishiar?

At the end of this thought, Yuder remained motionless for a long time.

Chapter 267

The vast Great Sarain Forest was not confined to mere plains and trees, despite stretching so wide as to blur the boundaries of several nations. Within its expansive bounds lay not only mountains and rivers, but unexpected marshes and rocklands as well.

Until recently, those who traded by land, the merchants, mercenaries, and adventurers alike, traversed these paths. Among them were the Cavalry members who, following the faint trails of these former travelers, decided to spend the night in a colossal crevice in the rocks by a shallow stream, providing just enough shelter to rest their weary bodies.

Despite the overpowering scent of the dense forest that made their heads spin and the discomfort of resting on the cold, fireless ground, no one complained. Protected by their comrades, nestled safely at the most secure spot within their makeshift camp, Ejain dozed off. However, a sudden rustling sound pulled him from the depths of his slumber.

While the rest of the troop curled up soundly asleep in their places, one person was missing from his original spot – their Commander, Kishiar La Orr. Turning his head, Ejain noticed him standing a little distance away by the stream. Despite the danger lurking in the darkness of the unknown, the night sky reflecting off the streaming water, shrouded in countless twinkling stars, was overwhelmingly beautiful.

The man with golden locks, glowing in the soft, pale-blue hue of the moonlight and starlight that descended from that sky, seemed like a natural part of this surreal scenery. Unconsciously captivated by this ethereal sight, Ejain finally noticed, slightly belatedly, that a small bird perched in the outstretched hand Kishiar pointed towards the sky.

'A bird?'

Although it was difficult to see clearly due to the intertwining darkness and moonlight, it was evident that the bird was not perched on his finger, but rather half-lying in his palm. Through the gaps between Kishiar's pale fingers, a sudden flash of red seemed to flicker.

Before Ejain could even contemplate the meaning of this sight, his body reflexively moved. As Ejain quickly rose, Kishiar gently covered the bird with his other hand, long strokes from its head to tail feather calming the small creature.

A moment later, Ejain, now standing on two feet, noticed the bird fluttering its small wings within Kishiar's grasp. He had certainly thought he saw blood, yet the bird now seemed perfectly unharmed as if he was still dreaming.

'Was I mistaken about it being injured?'

Though Ejain had been trained to remain calm in any situation, there were several times these past days when this was impossible. Now was one of those moments. While he blankly watched Kishiar and the bird, the man, gently caressing the bird's head with his fingertip, turned his head.

"If you are awake, shall we talk for a moment?"

He spoke as if he knew all along that Ejain was awake, his words delivered in a whisper barely audible, yet piercingly clear.

Ejain, careful not to wake the others, stepped out to join Kishiar. Despite always looking down on others due to his high status, Ejain did not feel the same in the presence of this noble. It felt as though he was back to his childhood.

The small bird in Kishiar's hand, noticing Ejain's approach, lit up its black, bean-like eyes and cocked its head. Tied to the bird's leg was a tiny pouch, used for carrying letters.

"A courier bird, then?"

"The following Peletta Knights brought letters for you," began Kishiar. "But their contents were rather unusual."

"...I wonder what they contained."

"Did a deceased servant ever present you with a lost hair tie, Prince? And, do you still possess it?"

Kishiar's question was abrupt, yet his face betrayed no hint of jest. Ejain studied his eyes for a moment, then quickly nodded his head.

"Yes, there was such an instance. I still have it, but why..."

"Apparently, it seems to carry a scent that someone might be tracking."

The explanation was brief, but it gave Ejain enough to surmise the circumstances. He immediately lowered his head, looking at his chest area.

"It seems new assassins are on their way. Assassins who track people through scent... I have a hunch about who sent them."

The face of the dead servant flickered in his mind. Biting his lip, Ejain reached into his pocket and pulled out the hair tie. It was a keepsake from his mother, something he'd never parted from since he thought he'd lost it once. However, if it was indeed a cause for being tracked, he had to dispose of it naturally.

With a glance at the hair tie, Ejain was about to throw it into the stream without any hesitation. He would have done so if Kishiar's outstretched hand hadn't stopped him.

"...Why do you stop me?"

"If you discard something so precious that you've been carrying around, won't you regret it someday?"

"But what choice do I have? As it is..."

"Even if we kill them, other assassins will keep coming. You can't keep discarding things to live."

"What then, are you suggesting?"

In response to Ejain's question, Kishiar broke into a strange smile.

"Nothing."

"Excuse me?"

"You needn't do anything. They will never make it here anyway."

"What do you mean?"

Bemused by his response, the red pupils gazed somewhere beyond the forest.

"If they're following the scent, they'll follow exactly where you've been. Remember where we were last."

Ejain blinked, taking a moment to swallow.

"The base where the mages stay...!"

Many mages who had been at the briefly visited base sprung to mind. The young priest who was attempting to heal them, and one other face left behind there passed through his mind.

The Cavalry member with a strange aura and black hair. The first friend he had ever made in his life, Ejain was taken aback as he recalled him.

Others he might not have minded, but he couldn't allow that man to suffer due to him.

"Isn't that an even bigger problem? They will be in danger there because of me. What can I... You need to send a message there quickly, don't you?"

Despite Ejain's dismay, Kishiar calmly shook his head.

"Even if we send word now, it will be too late."

"Then please send someone there, anyone. Even if late, so they can have some help."

"There's no need."

"What are you trying to say?"

"What I am saying is that, as long as the person we left there remains, there is absolutely no need to worry."

Ejain stared in surprise at Kishiar.

He immediately knew who was being referred to as the person they had left behind. It was the very man, whom Ejain had just been worriedly anxious about.

"Don't you worry about... him?"

Ejain asked hesitantly. On the way, he had seen enough of Yuder's abilities left at the base to have a rough idea of how formidable he was. However, he couldn't understand Kishiar's calm face, asserting that there was no need to worry, even knowing that the assassins trailing Ejain might raid the place.

"Of course, I'm worried."

"He's one of your valued subordinates, isn't he?"

"I value him greatly."

"Then why would you say you'll leave him and do nothing?"

Just by watching for a few days, Ejain knew how much Yuder was devoted to Kishiar. He'd seen the concern for his Commander and comrades behind Yuder's emotionless face, and had felt a profound envy that such a person was not at his side.

And yet, the one who received that absolute faith was planning to abandon him in a moment of danger?

Seeing Ejain's skeptical expression, Kishiar smiled.

"If I were to return there now, he wouldn't listen to me ever again."

"..."

"The one I left behind is someone I trust to handle things even when we have no means left from our side. What we need to do is to trust our backs to him and quickly move forward, not turn back for unnecessary reasons."

Ejain was lost for words, just looking at the man before him.

'Trust? ...No, can it be called trust or faith, that thing?'

He felt the same emotion now as when he had been conversing with Yuder before. Something absolute, incomprehensible to him, seemed to stretch out, connecting the two men.

At first, he thought it was just deep loyalty. But now, looking into Kishiar's eyes, he got the feeling that maybe it wasn't just that.

"Anyway, since we have pursuers, we can't rest anymore. I will send the message back to the Peletta Knights. We should also move forward quickly. Are you okay physically?"

"I am, I'm fine."

Hearing Ejain's confused response, Kishiar smiled quietly.

"I'm glad."

Chapter 268

Before waking up his companions for departure, Ejain had watched in silence for a while at the retreating figure of Kishiar who had put his cap back on and was sending out the messenger bird. He had contemplated several times whether or not to discard the hair tie he held in his hand, but in the end, he could not. It was because Kishiar's words kept echoing in his mind.

'You can't keep discarding things to live.'

It felt like a phrase that pierced through Ejain's entire life, as if it had observed him from his birth. To survive in an environment filled with enemies, he had been relentlessly casting away whatever he possessed if necessary. But no one had ever said such a thing to Ejain.

In the eyes of others, Ejain was a magnificent prince who served his people despite countless difficulties, and he was to become the King of Nelarn, a being who would save the world. Such an entity could not be swayed by human emotions. He believed he should not hold onto anything given that he was born as a prince, while there were still destitute people everywhere who possessed much less than him. His family's affection, his servants who were like friends, his mother's mementos, none of these were more precious than his life and the future of Nelarn. They couldn't be.

But today, for the first time, he heard a counter-argument that he could move forward without discarding precious things. It was a truly strange statement.

Kishiar La Orr was a being that had no congruence with any information Ejain originally knew. According to the data he had gathered before coming to the Empire, he heard that Kishiar was a feeble body, fond of pleasures, and a symbol of the declining Empire, but the man before his eyes was entirely different.

Despite a seemingly pampered appearance as if he had lived the most luxurious life, he sat down on the dirty ground in the most casual manner, rested his body, and guarded his surroundings more vigilantly than anyone. The cool-headed judgment seen behind his seemingly playful attitude hinted that he had precise control over reason and emotion.

A self-control that felt cruel at times. But what should he conclude about feeling very human in some respects?

'Does that inexplicable faith that the man demonstrated come from there?'

Ejain's gaze shifted towards the sword sheath protruding slightly from the back of Kishiar's cloak. He still vividly remembered the shock when he first drew that sword and obliterated a corner of the forest. The mages, who knew little about swords, might have been fooled by his display of swordsmanship as a power of the Awakener, but Ejain, who had fiercely grasped the sword to protect his body for a long time, didn't fall for it.

Ejain did not know exactly what powers Kishiar La Orr possessed as an Awakener, but it was undoubtedly not related to swordsmanship. The swordsmanship he had shown so far was not an ability gained in a moment, but the result of constant training over a long period.

Weak and stupid? Who said that?

Until he faced Kishiar directly, Ejain thought that the changes occurring in the Empire were entirely due to Emperor Keilusa's intention. He would not have decided to visit the Empire personally if he hadn't sensed the positive ripple in the stagnant Orr Empire from the rumors that spread across the continent related to the Cavalry. Ejain would have otherwise reached out to other places.

However, after meeting Kishiar and observing him, he felt the need to significantly revise his thinking. The changes occurring within the Empire were not solely the work of Emperor Keilusa. The fine gentleman before his eyes was, in fact, the Emperor's true right-hand man, his sword, and further, someone who shared his mind.

'The Duke of Peletta originally had no plans to come here, but suddenly changed his schedule. And he shows his power unabashedly throughout. It's because they possess the strength that can assure the future of my return and the consummation of the deal.'

Even though he had come to negotiate a deal, staking the Emperor and his future on it, Ejain was certain he wouldn't be too surprised even if he was to fail and die. But Emperor Keilusa and Kishiar seemed not to consider such a possibility.

Just a few years ago, many across the continent anticipated that the worn-out imperial family would soon end, and the corrupt dukes would seize power. Ejain also thought this judgment would not be wrong.

But what about now? Could he ever have guessed he would personally meet the Emperor and Kishiar in search for the possibility to secure his future?

Up until now, he had assumed that Duke Peletta lived much more comfortably than him. But now, he thought that perhaps the path the Duke had walked might not be so different from his own, or even possibly more challenging. What could a man capable of enduring for decades, diligently hiding his exceptional abilities, while feigning idiocy, desire?

Leading others was a tense and difficult path, a tightrope walk toward the future amidst enemies on all sides. Unlike Ejain, who was uncertain of the future, Kishiar showed no such anxiety in his broad and upright posture. It felt unnatural, and he wondered if he was overestimating Kishiar's abilities based on mere days of observation.

Was it just a delusion, or was he indeed a person capable of rewriting a chapter of history?

The words of Yuder Aile, that sounded like a prophecy telling him to think of the power he would gain in the future and what comes after, suddenly floated in his mind. Was this strange man before his eyes considering what he could accomplish with his own power and what would come after?

Pushing a carriage that's already moving to gain speed is easy. However, getting something that's been still for a long time to move again requires much more effort.

'If it's someone like him who's managed to hide his true power and form from the world for such a long time, there's nothing he can't do. Even if it's the difficult task of moving the decaying Empire.'

It was strange. Despite acknowledging his own status as the prince of Nelarn, the more he observed Yuder Aile, and faced Kishiar, who sent awe-inspiring trust, the more curious he became about their future.

The fact that it didn't feel negative was both curious and strange.

Ejain decided not to discard his mother's heirloom hair tie while watching the straight back of the man whose secrets he couldn't even begin to guess. And for the first time in a very long while, he thought about his own future that was not negative.

As soon as day broke, the mages of the Western Mage Union began to move busily again. From outside the window, the sound of igniting the magic stones to complete the repair of the magic circle and set up a new formation could be heard.

In the end, Yuder had risen from his bed in the wee hours to search for Priest Lusan who had failed to return to his quarters all night. He found Lusan, curled up by the bedside of the most seriously injured patient, caught in a brief slumber.

"Priest Lusan."

"Uh... hmm. Sir Yuder?"

Upon seeing Yuder's face, Lusan forced his swollen eyes open and shot up from his position, startled.

"Oh, did I oversleep? My goodness. Dawn has already broken!"

Witnessing him immediately checking the patient's condition, Yuder knew persuading him to return to his quarters for even a little rest would likely be fruitless. Impressed by his resilience, Yuder opened his mouth.

"While I understand your dedication, please do not skip meals. Those returning in three days would be quite dismayed to find you in such a pitiful state."

"Of course. Are you well, Sir Yuder? I heard from the mages that you've been working tremendously hard all day yesterday."

In reality, their reactions were more akin to shock or curiosity rather than admiration, but Lusan softened the truth. He was concerned that his words might potentially sap the spirits of the assistant of the Commander, who was left alone and ardently helping others. Yuder understood the meaning hidden in his words quite easily and responded with a small smile.

"I'm alright."

"That's good. Then let's have breakfast together and again dedicate ourselves to our respective tasks here today. Ah, right. How is the condition of your spot? Let me check it before you go, and I'll imbue you with some divine power."

Yuder recalled the condition of the spot on his right hand that he had checked before leaving that morning. Although the spot had spread across the entire back of his hand due to strenuous use, its color was faint and there was no pain. He figured he probably didn't need to ask the already exhausted Lusan for his divine power.

"No, I think it should be fine for now. I'll ask for your help when I return."

"Is that so? The intervals at which it appears seem to be increasing, and you said there's no pain, so it looks like a positive change. But do come find me immediately if you need me. Sir Enon was quite worried about that spot of yours until the end."

'Enon?'

Yuder felt a slight sense of joy at hearing his name after such a long time. Despite his outward pretense of indifference, Enon was more affectionate than anyone Yuder knew.

"I understand."

After eating together, they each went their separate ways. As soon as Yuder stepped outside, a group of mages who had spotted him from afar greeted him with faces that, while still slightly awkward, were much softer than they had been the day before.

"Hello. You've had breakfast, I presume?"

"Yes."

"Good. Lorna over there was looking for you. She said to call you when you arrived. She's working on restoring the magic circle."

"I see."

"And if you have some spare time... um... would it be alright to ask some more questions about things we didn't cover yesterday? I've been so preoccupied, I couldn't sleep properly last night."

So they were that curious. Yuder slowly nodded at the mages who lowered their voices to ask. He didn't see the mages clenching their fists and passionately lighting a fire of enthusiasm behind his passing back.

"Sir Aile, you've arrived. Have you given thought to what I mentioned yesterday?"

Chapter 269

"Sir Aile, you've arrived. Have you thought about what I told you yesterday?"

"Yes."

Lorna, greeting Yuder a bit away from the mages busy reconstructing the shattered defensive barrier, lowered her voice as she surveyed the surroundings.

"What will you do? Would you like to join me today to see the ruins and other places? Or will you wait until all your companions return?"

"If it's okay, I'd like to go today."

It was an obvious choice, without room for hesitation. Upon hearing Yuder's answer, Lorna nodded in affirmation as if she had expected it, subtly surveying their surroundings.

"I thought you might say that. Please, follow me."

Thanks to Yuder's help with the mages all day yesterday, the atmosphere had considerably softened. However, if they found out he was joining her to the ruins, someone might suddenly object. As a result, Lorna took advantage of the others' busiest time to move, avoiding their attention.

"We'll need to join the others, but they're all people who've come from the village together, so you won't feel too burdened."

As she said this, two familiar mages waited behind a half-collapsed building.

"Ah, hello. When Lorna mentioned you might come along, we weren't sure, but you're really here. Did you rest well yesterday...?"

"Yes. Thanks to you."

Though the mages, who had fully experienced Yuder's Cavalry strength on the journey, didn't express their joy openly, their eyes revealed their relief at Yuder's participation. They soon began moving along a narrow path behind the collapsed building. The path wasn't naturally formed but had been crafted by felling trees and leveling the ground.

"It was fortunate that despite the numerous barriers breaking yesterday, a considerable number of barriers protecting this path remain intact. Of course, if monsters cause a disturbance like yesterday, it won't be much use."

Lorna, holding an offensive magic tool in her hand, spoke quietly. Her gaze was constantly surveying their surroundings.

"Exactly which places were you planning to visit today?"

"Five warehouses, the control points for the main barriers and amplifying barriers protecting the ruins, and Magic Spring Ruins... roughly these."

"That's quite a bit. Will you be able to check all of them by today?"

"That's why we need to hurry. Due to the monsters, I'm assuming quite a few of your barriers also got broken. We need to quickly assess the damage."

Just imagining the tenacity of the mages who, despite the rampant growth of the Great Sarain Forest that threatened to consume everything if neglected even a little, managed to maintain so many facilities, was overwhelming. As they walked, Yuder meticulously scanned the visible surroundings, recording the topography in his mind.

"This is a place with drastic changes in terrain. I can't see well because of the trees, but there seem to be many precipices that one could tumble down with just a slight misstep."

"Is the path too rugged?"

One of the other mages, guessing why Yuder was looking around so much, awkwardly started a conversation.

"No. But did you create this path because there was a need for a shortcut?"

"No. Most of the flat paths around here are being used as trade routes and we would need permission from others to use them. If it were just for short-term round trips by merchants or mercenaries, it would be fine, but we stay here for a long time and didn't want to pay usage fees, so we just blazed a new trail."

The mage, who had responded, spoke with tremendous pride.

"Even when it's hard, it's best when the heart is at ease. Our local mages are probably the strongest among all mages on the continent."

The implication of needing others' consent to use a well-paved road was tantamount to them being deeply involved in the overland trade occurring within the vast jungle.

There were many who made a fortune by providing their well-maintained trade routes to others and receiving a certain commission, but if they had been so stingy towards the mages who had helped others for such a long time, even during the periods of massive monster outbreaks in the west, that was a separate issue.

'Being so stingy they're shaking their teeth, indeed... now it makes sense why they aren't on good terms.'

"The guys from the Tain Family. It's such a relief that I haven't seen their usual noisy behavior of controlling the roads severely for months, stating they were starting a new business and creating new trade bases."

"Right. There were many rumors that they were making such a fuss not for normal items, but something dangerous. With the monster outbreaks, the monsters must have drank a lot of water because of the abnormality, so that's a good thing."

Thinking about the long-standing symbiotic relationship between the Tain Family and the Western Mage Union, Yuder suddenly turned his head at a comment he couldn't easily ignore.

"A dangerous item... What kind of item do you mean?"

As Yuder seriously responded to a thoughtlessly blurted-out comment, the mages made a surprised expression, and soon poured out the rumors they had each heard.

"Um, well, I'm not sure. There were rumors that they were creating a route to smuggle in raw materials for expensive drugs that nobles often use, and also, what was it?"

"Human trafficking."

"Ah, yes. In the large cities of the South, aren't illegal betting fight arenas where random opponents fight each other becoming popular? There was a talk that they were running out of people to put up for that, and they were bringing them from other countries. They said that was making a lot of money. So there was a rumor that the Tain Family was also trying to get involved in that."

The mages failed to notice the gradual darkening of Yuder's eyes upon hearing this.

'Human trafficking?'

There was such an incident in his past life. Shortly after Emperor Katchian ascended the throne, all kinds of crimes, including human trafficking, raged out of control as illegal fighting arenas became popular among the dissolute nobles. Eventually, Yuder had to suppress them as the Commander of the Cavalry. Many noble families were involved in the event, lost their property, and Emperor Katchian gained considerable fame thanks to that.

'But that was later than now. According to the investigation at the time, the Tain Family was not involved.'

Lost in his thoughts for a moment, Yuder slowly opened his mouth.

"It would be a terrifying matter if true... But moving ordinary people through the vast jungle isn't easy. It's a hard rumor to believe."

"That's understandable. We thought the same. But for about a year, there have been quite a few rumors among merchants and mercenaries about witnessing very ordinary-looking strangers in the jungle."

"Even among our Western Mage Union, there were some who claimed to have seen them. It was dismissed as a hallucination because it seemed so unbelievable."

Yuder's mind was tangled upon hearing the mages' words.

‘It's not a crack in the air, but a person...’

If the witnesses were not only the mages who mostly stayed near the bases or ruins, but also the merchants and mercenaries roaming the entire Great Sarain Forest, then the chances that this was no mere rumor were quite high. Could it truly imply that they'd partaken in the forbidden trade of this era, or that they had intended to?

'...It's not impossible, I suppose...'

"Over there, you can see the first warehouse."

Before the thought was concluded, Lorna, who had been leading the way, turned and pointed to a certain place. Just as she said, a warehouse sprang up suddenly in the forest. The mages quickly tucked away their interest in rumors and swiftly approached, scanning the surroundings.

"Huh, looks like those bastards haven't made it here yet. It's intact."

"There's not a single broken defense spell."

"Good. Let's move on to the next warehouse."

Fortunately, the warehouses, said to be arranged in a circle around the center of the Magic Spring and the magic circle, were mostly intact. But the mages, heading joyously towards the point where they could control the magic circle, were soon to realize that life was not always accompanied by luck.

"All the major defensive spells here are a mess... How about there?"

"It's worse here. It seems that more than half of the amplification circle is broken."

The mages moved around the massive magic circles drawn with magic stones, avoiding the broken ground and fallen trees. To Yuder, it was not clear how badly the situation was damaged, but the mages couldn't hide their shocked expressions, as if this place looked even more dreadful than any other disaster scene.

"We had just started to see a reaction from the magic power in the vicinity of the ruins on the amplification circle... What should we do if all this turned out to be futile?"

"Don't despair before you've even seen it. We need to go and assess the situation first."

"But look over there. The trail of monsters who broke the circle leads to the ruins..."

The eyes of a mage filled with minor fear were directed towards the forest, where the massive claw marks disappeared.

"It's too dangerous. We should report back about this and return only after the base restoration is fully completed."

"The monsters are likely gone from the ruins, leaving only their traces! If we retreat now, who knows when we'll have the leisure to return and examine it leisurely."

Yuder squinted his eyes and heightened his senses while the mages debated. He focused on sensing any signs from the direction where the monster tracks disappeared, but he felt nothing in particular.

'I don't know how far away those ruins are, but for now, there are no immediate threats. But it's not a bad thing to prioritize safety.'

"...Those who want to go back can return first and report. I will take responsibility and check the ruins myself."

At that moment, Lorna made a decision amongst the mages. Everyone else, it seemed, had decided that their lives were more valuable. Yuder squeezed himself in between the mages and spoke.

"I will accompany you."

Chapter 270

"I'll go with you."

"Are you sure you'll be alright? It's a relief for us to have your help, but sending just Lorna alone would be..."

"If anything feels dangerous, you must return immediately."

With a sigh of relief yet faces that still held a trace of uneasiness, the mages retreated.

Lorna also glanced at Yuder with a similar expression, before quickly moving forward with a stern look.

"Understood. Let's go."

The ruins weren't far from the magic circle, marked with traces of monsters. Lorna circled the vicinity, noting claw marks that seemed to disappear in another direction, her voice dropping to a hushed whisper.

"There are many mechanisms set up around the ruins to prevent intrusion. Fortunately, it seems like they've worked. We'll need to disable them to get in. Please wait a moment."

She stretched out her hand, touching a spot in the air. Following that, the atmosphere around Lorna's fingertips began to glow faintly, a departure from its previous state. Although invisible to the eye, it seemed as if magic was being manipulated.

After much effort, Lorna finally completed her task. A moment later, the scenery in the empty air rippled like a mirage, revealing a different image. It wasn't the familiar forest they had grown tired of seeing. The first thing to catch Yuder's eye was an open area where gigantic formations were drawn all over using magic stones and all sorts of tools, and a small guard post set up next to it.

"That's the presumed Magic Spring our Western Mage Union has been studying all this time. I think it's been at least a year since the last outsider entered here."

Lorna, catching her breath, pointed to a location. There were several rocks piled together that seemed to have been there for a long time.

'...they just look like regular rocks.'

To be honest, the place didn't resemble anything Yuder had faintly imagined. There was no visible water despite being named a 'spring', and there were no fences or walls to distinguish the area.

Anticipating Yuder's doubts, Lorna gestured.

"Take a closer look. Ordinary people might not understand why it's called a spring, but as an Awakener, you might comprehend without an explanation."

Yuder slowly walked forward. As he neared the rocks, the magic power from the intrusion prevention spells tingled his skin. He tried not to trigger them as he stood in front of the rocks, but still saw nothing special.

"What's important is what's inside those overlapping rocks."

What could possibly be within these common-looking rocks, piled on top of each other, that has captivated so many people for so long?

As he reached out to touch them, an invisible force seemed to suddenly surge from the dark crevice. He instinctively stepped back, and the surging sensation vanished as quickly as it appeared. There was nothing to see.

'...'

What was that just now?

Yuder squinted at the rock and carefully extended his hand once more. This time, even though he felt the same sensation, he didn't withdraw. As if responding to his action, the unseen force didn't disappear but began to gush out toward the outside.

'Could that be... magic?'

The formless energy that had burst forth from the rock crevice disappeared as soon as Yuder withdrew his hand. He repeated this action several times and realized that magical energy bubbled forth from inside the crevice whenever he approached it within a certain range.

The energy felt similar, yet distinct, to that sensed when ordinary mages cast magic. Invisible to the eye but exceedingly dense and vivid, one could feel its presence without concentrating specifically on it. It seemed closer to the energy that Awakeners released when they exerted their power than it did to magical energy.

"Do you see it?"

"Is this... magic power?"

"Indeed. To be precise, it is concentrated magic power almost equivalent to ancient magic. Now you understand why we named it the Magic Spring?"

Lorna beamed with a proud face.

"The legendary Archmage Luma and the early mages drew their power from a never-ending source of magic, the Magic Spring. I believe that the spring existed in a form similar to this. In a place filled with such dense magic, they must have discovered the true power of magic."

"..."

"The crevice is like the lid of a purse filled to the brim with cream, which in this case is magic power. As you approach, magic power scatters around as if you've squeezed the purse. We suspect that this place may have existed even before this Great Sarain Forest came into being. It's a living relic."

With her young eyes filled with ardent desire, Lorna continued looking at the rock crevice.

"It's not the quantity of magic power stored within that's important, but rather its concentration. The only place where such pure and dense magic power remains throughout the entire continent is likely here. If we can find a way to amplify and utilize it, I believe we can resolve the chronic shortage of magic power we're experiencing, along with the problems arising from it."

Lorna said that the mages of the Western Mage Union were very carefully researching it, casting spells to trap the magic power within so it wouldn't deplete too quickly. Yuder felt as if he was finally beginning to understand the stories that had previously been hard to grasp, even though Kishiar had explained them quite simply.

"There hasn't been any progress in the research for a long time, and even the Pearl Tower had given up hope. But recently, changes have started to occur... What could have sparked these changes?"

The rock crevice, from which the magic power flowed, was incredibly dense and dark, as if filled with shadow. Yuder frowned slightly as he observed the large and small magic circles densely surrounding it.

"When I heard about it before, it seemed you mentioned that changes in the spring only started recently... May I ask what changes have begun?"

"Hmm... I remember the changes started with the concentration of the magic power flowing out becoming increasingly dense after the completion of the 99-fold amplification magic circle that encompasses this whole area."

Lorna answered obediently.

"In fact, there was no amplification circle here when this research first started. We just believed that by understanding the difference between the concentrated magic power here and the ordinary magic power that exists in the current world, we would find the answer."

However, after a mage suggested installing an amplification circle, the mages of the Western Mage Union debated for a long time. Installation of an amplification circle required more money and time than a simple defensive circle. The long debate between those arguing that it was better to focus on other methods and those claiming that installing an amplification circle could be the answer to the changes eventually ended in favor of installation.

And the moment the amplification circle, which had taken a long time to set up, was complete, surprisingly, the magic power that was flowing from the crevices of the rocks began to show a much higher concentration than before.

"Although the amplification circle we were controlling is now half-broken, it doesn't seem like the damage is severe. We'll have to repair it and reinstall it soon."

Yuder was lost in thought, alternatively looking at Lorna's bright face, the source of magic power, and the magic circle surrounding it.

'Just by looking at it, it seems like the strange crack and the source of magic power have no correlation. But the fact that the crack was continuously witnessed here implies that there must be some connection...'

No matter how much he thought about magic, it was hard to find an answer. The absence of Kishiar was never more keenly felt and missed. Yuder looked around as if a crack might appear at any moment, then sighed quietly and opened his mouth.

"Did you, Miss Lorna, happen to see a crack here too?"

"Hmm, are you talking about that strange crack in the air we saw yesterday? I haven't seen it. Since I've been here, I've only looked at the spring, so I didn't have a chance to look elsewhere."

"I see."

"You came here to find that connection, but it must be disappointing that there's nothing today."

"Not at all. I'm grateful just to have been invited here."

At Yuder's neat reply, Lorna flashed a slightly different smile than before.

"Sir Yuder, you seem to possess a truly amazing ability. Honestly, I didn't expect someone who's not a mage to be able to see magic in such a short time. I don't know if all Awakeners are like that though."

"I didn't know that myself."

"You seem to adapt remarkably well to magic. I wonder what it would have been like if you had received a magic response test when you were a child. Have you ever taken one?"

"No."

A magic response test? His life was busy enough just running around the mountains, cutting down trees, and digging up edible grasses every day. Hearing Yuder's answer, Lorna covered her mouth with her hand and chuckled softly.

"Every year, countless children take that detection test hoping to become a mage, but most of them can't even see a thread of magic. Perhaps we missed out on a potential great mage named Yuder."

"That's too generous of you."

While brushing off her compliments, Yuder thought it would be better to come back another time with his comrades. However, as he was about to turn away, something caught his eye.

'...Wait a moment. The slight shadow in the crevice where the magic power is flowing... Isn't that a bit odd?'