

## Turning 621

### Chapter 621

"You've brought quite a lot. Where did the courier bird come from?"

"It came from Nathan. He said he arrived at the destination first and has been doing well for five days."

According to Kishiar, Nathan Zuckerman, who had reached the destination alone, was secretly investigating whether there was any information related to Diarca or the Crown Prince. Incredibly, within less than five days, he seemed to have uncovered something significant related to their goal.

"Though he hasn't written much, as he's still investigating, the fact that Nathan is certain of it suggests it's not just trivial information."

Yuder had worried that the unexpected onset of his heat period, which had cost him five days, might hinder their overall schedule. However, it was a relief that it hadn't. Yuder's previously grave expression softened slightly. Kishiar offered him a fruit with a smile.

"I went to the river and found quite a lot of Quaron ripening nearby. I've only brought the ones that looked good... Would you like to try one?"

Quaron, a winter fruit resembling raspberries, was a favored winter sustenance for wild animals. Yuder popped the clustered, bright red berries into his mouth. Each tiny berry burst with a clean, tart flavor as he chewed. Although different from cultivated fruits, Yuder was accustomed to this taste, having often picked such winter fruits, including Quaron, during his childhood in the mountains.

"It seems to be good," he noted.

"Please, Commander, have some too," Yuder offered.

Regaining his composure, Yuder noticed that the Quaron Kishiar had been holding were all gone.

"I'm fine. I've caught some fish, so I should get ready to cook them."

Considering Kishiar's high status, it seemed inappropriate to ask him to do more than just bring the fish, which were surprisingly large and numerous for being caught alone in the river during winter. Even if he had used his powers, the catch was impressively large.

Yuder looked at the pile of fish and shook his head.

"I'll take care of that. Just rest."

"I'm still affected by the heat, but I'm not a patient. I grew up in the wild. I can prepare them more quickly."

Kishiar burst into laughter at his words and then nodded in agreement.

"Alright, do as you wish. But I won't stop myself from watching and helping, alright?"

Of course, Yuder didn't object to that. But there was hardly any need for assistance. Yuder changed into fresh clothes and took out a small dagger intended for such miscellaneous tasks.

He skillfully cleaned and cut several fish, summoned water for washing, and then sliced them neatly. He skewered them and cooked them over the fire, controlling the flames with his fingertips to grill the fish to perfection without burning them.

The fish, now deliciously cooked and aromatic, were sprinkled with the juice of the remaining Quarons. The strong tartness of the berries, though different from raspberries, was effective in masking any fishy taste.

As he finished and looked at the pile of grilled fish, Kishiar asked,

"Is it done?"

"Yes. You can eat now."

"There was no chance to help."

Well, hadn't he said so?

The grilled fish Yuder had prepared was made entirely in his own way; it was neither aesthetically beautiful nor exceptionally tasty. Nevertheless, Kishiar ate every piece of fish Yuder offered him without any refusal. Sitting on the ground, eating grilled fish without chairs or a table, might have seemed a humble sight, but watching Kishiar, one wouldn't think so.

In fact, even Yuder, who was used to such modest cabins and simple meals, felt like he was sharing a very special experience.

It seemed Yuder wasn't the only one who felt that way.

"Hmm... Somehow, I feel like even if this were all a dream, I'd believe it," Kishiar mused.

Yuder remained silent.

"When I caught your scent carried by the wind five days ago, my head felt dizzy. But now, here I am, comfortably sitting and being treated to a meal you prepared yourself. If I had to choose which feels more like a dream, it would definitely be this moment."

It was the first time Kishiar had spoken of the moment five days ago when Yuder's heat had just started. Yuder belatedly recalled the Alpha Awakener mercenary he had dealt with.

'That guy. I had forgotten about him...'

Though Yuder had managed to handle the situation somehow, the scene Kishiar must have witnessed was likely not a pleasant one. Yuder, about to apologize reflexively, swallowed his words upon seeing Kishiar's red eyes. Instead, he offered his portion of fish to him.

"Please, eat this."

"Ah."

The man, with his eyes downcast and lips slightly parted, confidently took the fish, as if he had been waiting to do so from the beginning, with a sly attitude.

But Yuder, instead of feeling ridiculous at this sight, found his gaze continually drawn to Kishiar's red lips and the movement of his throat. Perhaps it was because they had already crossed a line from which there was no returning.

'Thinking such things even while eating...'

It was remarkable how strong a desire still lingered in him, despite the heat not having completely subsided.

It didn't take long for the numerous fish to disappear into their stomachs. During this time, Kishiar gently asked Yuder a few questions.

"Who taught you to cook like this?"

"It's hardly cooking... But I learned how to catch and prepare fish from my grandfather."

"So, you often ate like this where you lived?"

"Yes."

"May I ask what that place was like?"

Though Yuder wasn't eager to answer such a mundane question, he recalled Kishiar's previous curiosity about him. Now, with nothing more to hide, he wanted to answer as honestly as possible if Kishiar wished to know.

"What was it like... It was just a mountain, similar to this place. No, it was taller and deeper."

Though it was not long ago in terms of his physical age, the memories belonged to a place he lived in over a decade ago. Yuder vaguely recounted his old memories of where he had lived.

The small house he shared with his grandfather was a renovated place that once served as a shelter for herb gatherers and woodcutters. The nearest village was a half-day's descent away, making human contact rare and making him more familiar with animals and plants.

Catching fish in the streams and rivers flowing along the mountain range, gathering herbs and wild vegetables, and occasionally eating animals caught in traps were part of their daily routine. Seasonal berries and woodcutting techniques were all things he learned from his grandfather.

In the depths of the forest, a young boy named Yuder had lived alone without any issues, thanks to the skills his grandfather had taught him for surviving in such an environment.

"Weren't you scared living alone until you joined the Cavalry? You were quite young."

"In commoner society, that age is sufficiently old enough to live independently. I never felt scared."

Even deep in the forest where the nights were so dark one could hardly see in front of themselves, Yuder rarely felt fear. Whether it was strong winds pounding against the old door or encountering large wild animals that were difficult to handle alone, he was unfazed. Since his earliest memories, he had been like this—brave and not overly sensitive to external stimuli by nature.

However, sometimes he would climb to the top of the tallest tree in the forest and gaze into the distance. He would spend long periods contemplating what lay beyond the faintly visible buildings at the foot of the mountain, the plains, and the lush forests in the distance.

After awakening his powers, these thoughts grew increasingly intense. Following the sun across the sky, he felt that beyond its path lay something far more grand and exciting than the mundane life in the forest.

Perhaps beyond that horizon were people with abilities even more extraordinary than his. Maybe he would encounter things he had never even imagined. The idea of spending his life traveling no farther than down the mountain to sell wood and returning seemed dreadfully dull.

"You had such thoughts?"

"Yes."

Kishiar, listening to the story, wore an expression of great interest mixed with a tinge of regret.

"You seem a bit disappointed."

"I can't help but wonder how cute you must have been back then."

"Let me clarify... 'Cute' is hardly a word that would have suited me."

Even if he was more innocent back then, Yuder was still Yuder. No matter how one looked at it, he wasn't the type to be overly praised for his demeanor.

But Kishiar didn't agree; he just smiled silently in response.

Yuder decided to change the subject.

"Shall I finish tidying up the house now?"

"Yes. It was nice hearing about your past. Share more stories with me later."

Yuder couldn't fathom what Kishiar found so interesting about it, but if that was what he wanted...

Silently, Yuder got up and approached a pile of assorted items. Most of the things in the cabin seemed to have been left behind by herb gatherers. Tools with missing parts used for gathering herbs, pieces of torn cloth, and sacks containing dried-up, withered herbs were scattered in disarray.

'Burning them might be best,' Yuder thought as his gaze settled on the sacks emitting a musty smell.

It was then that he noticed something. His eyes casually drifted to a spot and stumbled upon a familiar shape.

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It was then that it happened. Unintentionally, Yuder's gaze fell upon something familiar amidst the items he was about to burn.

'That is...'

With swift action, Yuder reached into the pile and pulled out a dirty sack. The sack, covered in dark, blood-red stains and torn with holes, revealed glimpses of shriveled brown lumps inside. At first glance, it was hard to discern their original form, but Yuder seemed to have an inkling of what they were.

Without hesitation, he opened the sack.

'As I thought.'

His grip on the sack tightened. He bent his head closer to better examine the dark stains. They were old, but one thing was certain:

The stains on the sack were not caused by its contents.

Yuder's semi-drowsy mind, still not fully recovered from the previous night, suddenly snapped to full alertness.

"Yuder?"

"Commander."

Kishiar, concerned by Yuder's odd behavior, had called out his name, and their eyes met. Yuder spoke first.

"How likely do you think it is to find a blood-stained sack containing dried and processed Dudureli mushrooms in such a place?"

Kishiar's eyes narrowed slightly as he immediately grasped the meaning of Yuder's words. Yuder held up the sack for him to see.

Inside were indeed the dried and processed Dudureli mushrooms, in a form just before being turned into powder, a poison previously used by Crown Prince Katchian. The condition was abysmal due to prolonged exposure to unfavorable conditions. Their original white color had turned brown, and the smell was unpleasant, indicating partial decay.

However, the presence of some intact pieces inside left no doubt about their identity.

Yuder recognized them easily, thanks to having seen the original form of the Dudureli mushrooms shown to Aishes Shand Apeto by Kishiar before. What caught Yuder's attention again was the bloodstain on the sack.

Initially, he thought it was liquid seeped from the decaying contents. But on closer inspection, it wasn't so. The stain was from blood, now faintly emitting the odor of decay, splashed during his earlier cleaning of the house using his powers. None of the other objects nearby bore similar stains.

'Prince Katchian had sent a servant to a nearby village months ago to secretly bring in these processed Dudureli mushroom poisons. And now, a blood-stained sack of Dudureli mushrooms happens to be here, at a rest stop used by local herbalists... Could this be mere coincidence?'

It couldn't be.

Yuder, even without Kanna, was certain of his intuition in this matter. This was undoubtedly related to the incident caused by Katchian.

And Kishiar, arriving at the same conclusion, had a similar chill in his gaze as he looked at the sack.

"...The servant who purified the poisonous mushrooms and then committed suicide after confessing that everything was his crime as soon as he was caught is one of the cases Nathan is currently pursuing. Perhaps we have found an item that might reveal the identity of the person who dealt with that servant."

Yuder didn't believe that the one who had gathered these mushrooms was still alive. The bloodstains on the sack and the fact that no one had sought it until now further solidified his belief.

"If it were Crown Prince Katchian, it wouldn't be surprising if he had silenced everyone involved with the processed mushrooms immediately after obtaining them," Yuder mused aloud.

However, unlike in his previous life, the young Katchian likely did not know this yet.



Killing someone is certainly one of the best ways to keep a secret, but the stench of blood that it emits cannot be hidden forever. The traces of those abnormally vanished linger like shadows, incessantly following the murderer. Even the great Yudrain Aile, could not escape this shadow.

Thus, it was highly probable that this sack was a 'trace' deliberately hidden by someone who had disappeared.

Buried among other odorous miscellaneous items, Yuder almost failed to recognize it and could have burnt it by mistake. Setting the sack down, he resolved to inspect the other items in the area more thoroughly.

The laxity of his mind, eased while with Kishiar's company, hardened again in front of the old, hardened bloodstain.

It was just as he was clenching his fist, trying to rid himself of the remaining lethargy through the pain in his palm, that a large hand reached out and grasped his wrist. The hand slowly and gently unfolded each stiff finger.

"Now I can speak," Kishiar said, looking up at Yuder's dark, sunken eyes.

"You must think it's right to leave now that we've discovered something urgent, even if you're not fully recovered? Thinking this much is manageable?"

The accuracy of his words made Yuder's fingertips twitch. Kishiar continued, looking down at Yuder's hand in his grasp.

"Don't do this."

"..."

"You're not okay yet. You mustn't overexert yourself until you're fully healed. Even if others say it's fine, I won't allow it."

"But..."

At Yuder's soft mutter, Kishiar's grip tightened. His intense gaze, though piercing, conveyed a heartfelt pain to Yuder.

"Trust me. Chasing after Katchian's misdeeds is not that difficult. We can manage it indirectly, maintaining communication from afar. Do you think Nathan and I are insufficient for this task?"

Observing Kishiar, Yuder realized something.

Kishiar's deliberate use of 'Katchian' instead of 'Crown Prince Katchian', which he usually called him, was intentional. And the reason was probably...

'Because of me.'

It seemed like something had changed in his attitude as he recalled his previous life. Though confident in deceiving others, he couldn't deceive Kishiar.

Yuder recalled his own unfamiliar face he had seen through the window while Kishiar slept. He might still be wearing the same expression unknowingly.

Kishiar La Orr now knew that he had once died at the hands of Yuder on the order of Katchian. Yuder couldn't begin to imagine what feelings that man had experienced upon learning this.

What more could be said here?

In silence, Yuder acknowledged the cold, heavy emotions he hadn't realized he had been feeling. Slowly, he shook his head.

"No."

Finally, Kishiar's eyebrows softened, and a faint smile appeared.

To tell him not to endure, Yuder himself must also learn to let go of the things he had always endured. This realization struck him anew.

Yuder had remained in the cabin that day as well, cradled in Kisiar's embrace, listening to the heartbeat echoing from within his chest. Each time he heard it, the invisible voids within him seemed to quiet down bit by bit. Later, he realized that the persistent fever, which hadn't subsided yet, didn't seem so resentful, perhaps owing to the soothing sound of that heartbeat.

The fever, which had been forcibly suppressed within him, slowly dissipated in the comforting warmth.

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Yuder stood in a dim darkness.

'Why am I here?' he thought dazedly, looking down to see a white garment. He immediately recognized it as the ornate uniform of the Cavalry Commander, elaborately embroidered with gold thread, made for the Yudrain Aile.

While he silently observed this familiar yet seemingly long-forgotten attire, a cold voice spoke from beside him.

"New Cavalry Commander, enter the Hall of Honor."

It was the chief attendant of Emperor Katchian. Only when Yuder met his unfeeling gaze did he fully grasp the situation.

This was his appointment ceremony as the Commander. The assembly for his nomination was just beyond the door in front of him. Yuder slowly straightened his attire and took a deep breath.

Whispers from not too far away reached his ears.

"They say he's utterly cold-blooded, and indeed he seems to be. He doesn't look happy at all."

"It's not cold-blooded, but fear. A commoner in such a position must be terrified."

Yuder did not turn his head. Hearing these voices only quieted his mind more, and instead of feeling small, a feeling of boredom was already welling up in him.

"Cavalry Commander. Aren't you going to enter? Is there a problem?"

The chief attendant urged him with a hint of annoyance. Just as Yuder was about to respond, a familiar voice came from right behind him.

"Yuder."

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"Yuder."

His voice was distinctly clear, unlike the other blurred, indistinct voices around. It was as if Yuder was encountering a real, living being among drifting ghosts. He furrowed his brow, feeling a strange sensation like heat spreading through his fingertips as if hot water had been poured over them. Slowly, he turned his eyes.

‘...’

However, there was no one where he turned his head. He thought he had heard a familiar voice, but perhaps it was a mistake.

"The door will open soon. We can't delay any longer."

The chief attendant, unable to wait, urged again. Yuder exhaled deeply and straightened his back. With his limbs aligned and his chin tucked, he assumed the perfect posture he had been taught time and again.

The chief attendant began to say something more, but stopped as he met Yuder's piercing black gaze from a higher vantage point. He momentarily closed his lips, but then frowned, seemingly embarrassed to feel intimidated while facing someone of common birth.

"...Go ahead."

The massive door began to open silently. Yuder started to stride confidently along the red carpet laid before him.

Brilliant light flowed in from the open door. Figures from various holy paintings and angel sculptures on the high ceiling looked down with smiling faces at Yuder entering alone.

Yuder, with an impassive face, scanned the young Emperor Katchian seated on the throne and a few others standing around him. It was his own inauguration ceremony, but none of those faces were familiar to Yuder. The nobles, in their refined attire, were only assessing the worth of the new Cavalry Commander, not offering congratulations or smiles.

Usually, an inauguration in the Hall of Glory was an honor reserved for positions like the Commander of the Imperial Knights, the Chief Court Mage, or an Imperial Army General, attracting a large crowd.

However, only a few attended Yuder's ceremony, most of whom were there just to impress the Emperor. The absence of fellow Cavalry members left the hall emptier than usual. Minimal decorations made the setting appear even more bleak and unremarkable.

But none of that mattered to Yuder. He wasn't bothered.

Instead, what captured Yuder's attention was a person standing inconspicuously at the end of the red path. Although everyone seemed to ignore his presence, maintaining a distance, Yuder felt strongly aware of him. The tall figure, head and shoulders above the others, couldn't be overlooked by pretending not to see.

Kishiar La Orr.

The last surviving descendant of the previous imperial family wore a not-so-flashy dark-colored outfit today. While it suited him well, Yuder found it odd, being used to seeing him in white ceremonial robes.

Yuder checked only up to that point, turning his head so as not to meet Kishiar's gaze. He continued to walk along the red path.

"Kneel, you who have reached this place."

Finally, at the end of the long path, Yuder reached the steps in front of the throne.

As instructed, Yuder knelt on one knee to pay respect. The young, almost boyish-looking Emperor Katchian, with a splendid crown atop his head, looked down at Yuder and then narrowed his eyes, lifting the corners of his mouth.

His expression, too, was not much different from the other nobles who seemed to be assessing Yuder's worth. The only difference was a faint glimmer of mild curiosity, caution, and an indiscernible satisfaction in his eyes.

Whatever reason he had for looking at Yuder like that, Yuder was in no position to ask or be curious about it. He silently bowed his head, listening to the voice coming from above.

The Emperor spoke at length, expressing his hope that the Cavalry would become a stronger pillar for the safety and future of the Orr Empire with its new Commander. Yuder's achievements as a Deputy Commander were hardly mentioned. The speech was filled with noble and elegant language, but its underlying meaning was clear.

“Therefore, the new Commander must be like a mountain that supports the rising sun every morning, like the sea that paves the way for fish to swim, sincerely responding to the needs of the Empire.”

The Emperor symbolizes the sun, and the people, the fish. In other words, the Emperor was saying to dedicate oneself unconditionally and prove loyalty to him and the Empire.

Don't forget that the excessive treatment you've received so far comes with corresponding responsibilities and costs. If you want to maintain the name of the Cavalry, you must show a completely different image. The Emperor's intention was very clear.

After the lengthy speech, Emperor Katchian stood up from his throne and received a ceremonial sword from the chief attendant. He placed the sword twice on Yuder's shoulder and recited words of blessing. Yuder responded by pressing his lips to the hem of the Emperor's robe, a vow of eternal service and loyalty.

Emperor Katchian nodded and gestured.

“I accept your loyalty. Yudrain Aile.”

For the first time, the Emperor called the appointee by name, announcing it to everyone.

The moment he did, the watching nobles were slightly surprised, exchanging glances at the unfamiliar name.

“What's this? I didn't hear about bestowing a name.”

It was an undeniably old-fashioned name, similar to his real name, as if carefully chosen. It was the highest honor the Emperor could bestow on a new retainer at such an event. But the Emperor's demeanor didn't seem to suggest that; what was going on?

However, the surprises didn't end there.

“Furthermore, I bestow upon you the title of Count. From now on, you shall stand here as Count Yudrain Aile.”

“A Count?”

“Count? I thought at most he would receive a courtesy title.”

“Maybe a Baron at best, but a Count all at once...”

“This is unbelievable.”

But since everyone present was there to impress the young Emperor, their voices weren't loud. Despite their shocked and dissatisfied expressions, they only whispered among themselves.

Was the young Emperor and the Diarca Ducal Family, standing behind him, actually placing great expectations on the new Cavalry? Was the seemingly modest inauguration ceremony a ruse to deceive onlookers before bestowing a major reward?

Political implications were rampant in the silent exchange of meaningful looks and signals.

Yuder, unaware of all these signals, simply stood there calmly. He didn't know that when the Emperor calls someone by a new name at such an event, it usually means he personally chose the

name. Hence, he was oblivious to any misunderstandings brewing around him. Even if he had known, he likely wouldn't have bothered to correct them.

After all, the new name given by the former Commander meant nothing to Yuder.

A formal name that would hardly be used, what did it matter who coined it or bestowed it? He was somewhat surprised to receive the Count title, as he hadn't anticipated that, but it was nearly the same to him.

Receiving a title didn't suddenly change where he lived or what he had to do. It was more meaningful to show his abilities and make a difference with his changed attitude than to rely on the weight of a title.

However, just because he felt that way didn't mean others did.

Emperor Katchian, who had bestowed the name and title upon Yuder, turned his eyes away with a faintly crooked smile. Duke Peletta, who stood quietly in the shadows, bowed his head very slowly as his eyes met the Emperor's.

His gesture seemed like a show of gratitude, or perhaps an acknowledgment of his defeat. The Emperor's smile deepened significantly as he watched Duke Peletta, who seemed ready to leave. Suddenly, the Emperor spoke out loud.

“By the way, we should have had a retirement ceremony for the former Commander... The country has been in turmoil, and we never found the time. What a pity.”

At the young Emperor's words, everyone's eyes turned to Kishiar La Orr. The man who was about to leave stopped in his tracks. A brief silence followed, and then the man turned his head back.

In that momentary pause, the surrounding nobles tensed up without realizing it, but the man who showed his face was smiling like a fool, as if oblivious to the insult.

“I think I've worked long enough... Aren't retirement ceremonies for older people with too much time on their hands? After standing so long today, I just want to go back and drink some 70-year-old Kulavang wine that came in yesterday.”



His expression was so foolishly relaxed that even the nobles, who had no loyalty to the former imperial family, felt oddly stirred.

Was this foolish man really aware of the situation? Did he understand that he was the only direct descendant of the first Emperor left, and the attention and burden that would follow?

He had even let go of his only real weapon, the position of the Cavalry Commander. Duke Peletta seemed indifferent even to his rumored successor. Looking at his carefree face, full of thoughts of eating, drinking, and playing, it was hard to believe the rumors that he had toyed with the new Commander.

“Ha... Haha.”

Emperor Katchian laughed with a similar sentiment in his eyes.

As the Emperor laughed, the nobles also started to chuckle awkwardly and quietly, looking around. The laughter gradually grew more widespread.

“Still, it would be a shame to send you off like this without greeting the new Commander, wouldn’t it?”

“I suppose... I don’t really know.”

The man, looking at Yuder, tilted his head and then smiled again.

“Well, if a greeting is necessary, then it must be done.”

Yuder watched the man walking towards him. With no emotion, the man lifted the corners of his mouth in an exaggerated manner, bowed before Yuder, and before he could say anything, grabbed his hand.

Then he slid his lips down from the back of Yuder’s hand to the fingertips, kissing it smoothly.

Before anyone could express their surprise at the fact that a Duke of imperial descent had behaved in such a manner towards a commoner, Yuder's expression, which had been blank for a moment, contorted, and he violently withdrew his hand as if it had been burned.

'...'

Disgust. Confusion. Anger.

And all other negative emotions that he could not hide were openly displayed.

The fierce emotions that swept through his wide-open eyes were laid bare for all to see.

Gradually, the laughter around them died down, and silence fell.

As Yuder exhaled a hot breath between his tightly clenched lips, Kishiar suddenly burst into clear laughter.

“Oh, did you not like that? Now that you've become the Commander of the Cavalry, I thought you'd be worthy of such a greeting. It seems my little joke has elicited quite the response.”

Everyone gasped as they saw the scratch on the lips of Duke Peletta, who had just raised his head. The man who nonchalantly rubbed the slightly bleeding wound seemed to ponder what more to say before adding just one more sentence.

“Hmm... Well then, Count Yudrain Aile. I wish you well as the new Cavalry Commander from afar. Though, anyone would probably do a more sincere job than me. ...Anyway, take care.”

With a nonchalant greeting and a wry smile, Kishiar turned his back before getting a response. He approached Emperor Katchian, who had been observing the situation, to bid farewell.

“Then, I shall take my leave now. I am about to depart for Peletta and have much to do before I go.”

It was clear from his expression that he wasn't actually busy with many tasks. Emperor Katchian, hearing his sophisticated yet frivolous tone, nodded with a cool smile.

“Then, there's nothing to be done about it.”

After showing his respect, Kishiar withdrew. As he moved away, the nobles, who had been silent until then, began to chatter and laugh again.

It wasn't unusual for the carefree Duke Peletta to draw criticism for his thoughtless actions, especially when he ended up bleeding from his mouth for trying to mock someone of common birth. It was so typical of him that it was almost laughable.

“Who said that the new Commander stood in Duke Peletta's shadow at this gathering? He seemed like nothing but an enemy.”

“It seems that even Duke Peletta can only toy with the Cavalry for so long, and that was all there was to it.”

After a few comments, people quickly forgot about him. Instead, their thoughts were filled with the new Emperor, who had shown a dignified and unshakeable power, unlike the previous imperial family, whose influence had completely waned.

Contrary to everyone's expectations that the Cavalry would be disbanded, the young Emperor had instead bestowed a great title and opportunity on the new Cavalry Commander. Wouldn't those who had been loyally serving the Emperor, even if they were of common birth, receive recognition? The thought quickly spread that under Emperor Katchian's reign, even those who had been unfairly pushed out of the center of power due to lack of family influence might now dream of new opportunities.

The nobles, quick to notice the changing tides of history, congratulated themselves for being there and began to make their calculations. Emperor Katchian, too, smiled willingly at their greedy gazes, his face suggesting he already knew what they were thinking.

The fact that a common-born novice had been granted such an overflowing title and name no longer attracted anyone's interest.

And there was Yuder, silently watching the back of Kishiar as he opened the door and left alone.

‘...’

Could this be the last time with Kishiar La Orr?

He hadn't imagined a beautiful ending, but he never expected it to end like this either.

An indescribable feeling welled up in him, but the inexperienced youth didn't know how to express or resolve it.

Yuder watched the man disappear beyond the door without looking back even once and clenched his fist. Just as he was about to turn away with the cold wind and head toward the opposite exit,

“If you grip your fist that tightly, you might hurt your hand.”

Yuder stopped in his tracks as if he had seen a ghost. The man who had just disappeared was now standing in front of him.

How could this be? Yuder stepped back in surprise and caution, and the man smiled with softened eyebrows. It was a smile that seemed fragile and pained.

Yuder saw a smile he had never seen before, yet it was strangely familiar, and the unfamiliar Kishiar La Orr spoke.

“Can you see me now? So, who am I?”

“...Kishiar, La Orr.”

“That’s right.”

Yuder then realized something. Initially too shocked to recognize him, the man's attire was completely different from that of Duke Peleta, who was just in front of him. He was dressed simply, as if about to travel, and his complexion and eyes were different from before... in a way.

If he had to describe it, it felt more like a living person.

Quickly looking around, he saw the nobles still bustling. Emperor Katchian was quietly talking with the chief attendant. They seemed oblivious to Duke Peleta's disappearance and his return in a different form. Only Yuder seemed to see Kishiar here.

How could this be possible? Lost in thought, the man slowly continued.

"It's time to wake up from this dream."

A dream? This?

It seemed unbelievable. Yet as he turned his head, the faces of the nobles and the emperor began to blur strangely. The Hall of Glory they stood in did the same.

Yuder, feeling the ground beneath him turn into darkness, reflexively grabbed the man in front of him. The man did not push Yuder away but instead held him tightly, as if invisible strings were binding them together.

Feeling the familiar scent from his embrace, Yuder faintly felt his mind waver.

'...Ah.'

Yes. Now it seems clear.

All that he had just seen was something he had experienced before...

Suddenly, a feeling of deep falling engulfed them. They fell like leaves into an abyss. Yuder clenched the embraced body tightly, gritted his teeth, and... opened his eyes wide.

"..."

Breathing heavily, he saw the shabby walls of a cabin beyond his breath.

'A dream...'

He had experienced dreams of the past many times, but this dream was somewhat strange. The situation at the appointment ceremony was one thing, but what about Kishiar suddenly appearing in the middle of it?

Kishiar, who suddenly intruded midway through the dream, was wearing the same clothes as the man currently embracing Yuder with his eyes closed. This had never happened in his past dreams before... Could it be an effect of the heat period?

As Yuder pondered whether to wake the man with his eyes closed, lost in thought, the lashes of Kishiar fluttered slightly. A moment later, his eyelids opened, revealing his bright red eyes without a hint of sleepiness.

The man, after silently observing Yuder's features for a while, quietly spoke.

“...I once wondered why you reacted differently to the same action. I couldn't figure out why you welcomed a kiss on the forehead or cheek, yet recoiled from one on the back of the hand.”

Yuder felt a sudden sinking feeling in his chest.

Kishiar looked down, a faint smile on his face.

“Now I understand the answer.”

“Commander. You couldn't mean, just now in the dream...”

Before Yuder could finish, Kishiar pulled him in closer with a stronger embrace.

“Yes. It was me.”

The idea that they had shared the same dream was already hard to believe, but this time, Kishiar had entered Yuder's dream with clear consciousness.

Even though he now knew what had happened in his past life, seeing it directly like this was a vastly different experience. It might even be better than seeing his own death, but remembering how

until recently Kishiar had been endlessly reviewing the strategy game without even sleeping in secret, Yuder was at a loss for words.

“...I didn't intend for it. That...”

“It's okay.”

Before Yuder could slowly speak, Kishiar firmly replied.

“I was a bit surprised when I realized it was your dream. You didn't seem to fully recognize me, so I just followed and watched you. I never thought I'd see my previous game-self in this way...”

After a brief pause, as if choosing his words, the man chuckled.

“...Seeing it firsthand, I guess I feel relieved.”

Relieved? It was a different response than Yuder had expected.

But looking at his expression, he didn't seem to be lying. Even employing all his senses and subtle connections, he felt the same.

Still, Yuder cautiously sought confirmation.

“Really?”

“I've really lost a lot of trust after the last incident. It's easy to destroy but hard to build, isn't it?”

Kishiar made a pained face as he shook his head, then tapped Yuder's head with a clearer smile than before.

“But it's true.”

“...”

“I won't ask how you felt then. I don't wish to.”

Kishiar asked if he could talk about his impressions and question him. Slowly, Yuder nodded in unfamiliar feelings.

“...Yes.”

It took a little while for Kishiar to start speaking, unlike his playful words earlier. He caressed Yuder's hair and back for a long time, lost in thought, then slowly began to speak.

“Your outfit was really beautiful.”

“...I've never thought that way.”

“No. At first, I thought it was the same as mine, but upon closer inspection, I realized the embroidery and fabric were quite different from mine. But then... a question arose.”

“What is it?”

“I once saw you in a Commander's outfit in the illusion of Nahan.”

Kishiar, with an unsmiling face, brought up something unexpected.

“The outfit I saw then was the same as the one in the dream.”

“...That's...”

“I didn't think much about it then, as the illusion itself was the issue. I only recognized that you were wearing a Commander's outfit. But seeing an outfit that I had never seen before in an illusion, what should I think of that?”

Chapter 625



"I didn't think much about it then, as the illusion itself was the issue. I only recognized that you were wearing a Commander's outfit. But seeing an outfit that I had never seen before in an illusion, what should I think of that?"

Yuder tried to think of another possibility where all these discrepancies could fit together as he looked into his sunken red eyes. However, everything he thought of felt like mere speculation, and it was difficult to be certain.

Kishiar continued speaking as he looked at the thoughtful Yuder.

"I've said this before, but I never found that illusion frightening in the least. I even speculated that perhaps that person had used a different illusion on me, one that didn't incite fear."

Yuder had thought the same thing.

Yuder, as seen by Kishiar in the illusion, was wearing the Cavalry Commander's uniform.

It seemed utterly unrelated to be a product of Nahan's illusions, which were known for drawing out and exaggerating the hidden fears of people.

Kishiar said that he never suspected Yuder of coveting the position of Cavalry Commander or found it frightening. Yuder had never felt differently about this. Therefore, Kishiar speculated that it might have been a reflection of his subconscious anxiety after seeing Yuder, who had almost died facing Pethuamet.

But considering it, Nahan knew what illusion Yuder had seen in the East before. If he had seen the previous life's Kishiar approaching while calling out the name "Yudrain" in a bloodied Commander's uniform, it was likely that Nahan, not knowing about the previous life, thought Yuder genuinely feared and wanted to kill his own Commander.

Then, wasn't it a rather clever choice for the illusion to show Yuder in a Commander's uniform to surprise Kishiar and sow discord?

Kishiar's speculation that the illusion wasn't one that stimulated fear but one created by Nahan himself seemed quite logical.

The fact that Kishiar didn't feel fear when he saw the illusion added credibility to this speculation.

But for this speculation to be true, the Commander's uniform Yuder wore in the illusion had to be Kishiar's. The uniform of Commander Yudrein Aile was very similar to Kishiar's, but upon close inspection, it wasn't exactly the same.

"But you know, when I saw myself from the previous game in a dream."

Kishiar's voice continued. His gaze was blurred, staring at something unknown.

"In the expression on your face as you stood alone, I felt the very fear I had never experienced seeing that same sight."

It felt like a faint murmur thundering powerfully in his head.

Yuder quickly shook his head.

"That's impossible."

Kishiar had seen it too. Throughout the Commander's appointment ceremony, the attitude of Kishiar La Orr at that time did not seem to feel such emotion at all. Fear? That didn't make any sense.

"Do you think so?"

"There's no reason for it."

"There's no reason."

Kishiar repeated Yuder's words and fell silent for a moment. Yuder realized that his breathing had quickened only after feeling Kishiar's hand gently stroking his back.

After calming his sharply heightened senses, Kishiar spoke again.

"I have a question for you. Who made the outfit you wore in the dream?"

Yuder, seemingly already guessing the answer, sighed and responded while looking at the man.

"It was the Cavalry Commander at that time."

Back then, Yuder hadn't even considered getting a new uniform for himself, anticipating a promotion to the Commander's position. He thought it would be sufficient to obtain and tailor one of the many uniforms that Kishiar wouldn't wear anymore.

The previous life's Kishiar had taken measurements of Yuder, specifying the material and the pattern of the embroidery, and had a new uniform made from scratch for him.

Yuder had guessed that it was probably due to Kishiar's pride.

He remembered how annoyed he was, having to go out for the fitting, thinking it was a waste of time and money, and that he would rather continue wearing his usual clothes.

But in the end, he wore the outfit Kishiar had prepared on the day of the appointment ceremony.

Until his death, Yuder's uniform remained unchanged from that design. First, because he thought it better to use his energy on other matters than changing uniforms, and second, because the uniform was designed to not go out of fashion despite long use.

A faint smile appeared and then disappeared on the man's face as he listened to Yuder's answer, as if he had expected it.

"There are many types of fear. The instinctive, intuitive fear for life engraved in our instincts. Or the vague fear of imagination, like fearing ghosts or spirits. And many more. I'm not afraid of a knife at my throat or ghosts, but there's one thing. I've often thought it frightening to face an ambiguous yet foreseeable future."

An ambiguous yet foreseeable future. It was a seemingly difficult concept to understand.

"Could you give an example?"

"Like when I knew that I would eventually die violently, yet I had to sleep to face the next day. Or when I felt the cycle approaching but could do nothing about it."

"..."

"The strongest I ever felt that emotion was during the late Emperor's funeral. It was the first time I thought there was nothing more powerless and frightening than just looking at the reality in front of me, while I could clearly imagine what would happen to me, my brother, and this country in the future."

So... did Yuder feel that the scene in his dream might have been a similar situation for Kishiar back then?

It seemed unlikely, but looking at Kishiar's face made him confused.

Even if the previous life's Kishiar had been afraid of seeing himself in the Commander's uniform, it was Kishiar who had left the position and departed first. It was a matter too far gone to reconsider now...

As Yuder remained silent, Kishiar embraced him tightly.

"I didn't bring this up to make you rethink about me from the previous game or to change anything. There's no need for that."

"Then, what conclusion are you trying to reach with this story?"

"If Nahan's illusion was indeed meant to evoke fear in me, and the illusion I saw of you was indeed from a previous life... maybe it reflected the fear of a 'me' that is me, but not the current 'me'."

Yuder's heart clenched tightly for a moment.

So... does it mean that Nahan used his ability to create an illusion of fear, but for some unknown reason, it manifested the 'fear' felt by a previous life of Kishiar, not the current one?

"It's impossible..."

"I... don't really know. It seems impossible to me."

"Think it through step by step, based on the facts that have been revealed," Kishiar said softly.

"The more urgent a situation, the more likely a person is to revert to familiar methods without thinking. Nahan was about to be caught and killed at that time. In such a situation, he would likely use a power he was familiar with and had often used. That power, as we have seen, is to evoke and reveal the target's fear."

Indeed, the most frequently used power by Nahan against his enemies had been to stimulate fear. In a situation where he was about to be captured by someone as formidable as Kishiar, there wouldn't have been much room to devise something new.

"The me here and now wouldn't be afraid even if you appeared in that uniform again. But the man I saw in your dream, he didn't seem unafraid. Even if it seems illogical, if something has already happened and there are fitting pieces, shouldn't we keep the possibility open?"

If a person could return from the dead to the past, why couldn't other things be believed? It seemed Kishiar was applying the same reasoning to himself that he had accepted when he believed in Yuder's return.

"Think about the dreams I've had but don't remember, the strange connection between us that seems to be strengthening since we've been together... Maybe that illusion was also related to that."

Hearing that, Yuder reflexively remembered the time Kishiar had called out 'Yudrain' in his sleep.

The chilling memory of that day. He hadn't thought further about it due to the shock, but on reflection, that too seemed more related to Kishiar's previous life than this one.

'...Illusions and sleep-talking... I never thought there could be a common phenomenon, but maybe there was.'

The emotions he had dismissed as impossible melted away with a dull ache.

Yuder had always thought of Kishiar in this life and the previous one as the same yet different beings. He had never considered that Kishiar in this life could be related in any way to his previous life.

But now, with the spectral presence of Yuder from the past already here, and their mysterious connection, perhaps it was natural for Kishiar to be entangled in it too.

The thought that somewhere in the unseen depths of the current Kishiar, something from a long-gone past life might exist brought a strange feeling, like a dry throat and stinging eyes.

But the unwavering red eyes facing him looked a bit pained, and Yuder swallowed the sensation.

'...Right.'

Nothing was certain yet. And even if the speculation turned into conviction, in the end, only one thing mattered.

Kishiar La Orr, alive here and now. Just that.

As long as he didn't forget that.

Chapter 626

Kishiar La Orr, alive here and now. Just that.

As long as he didn't forget that.

With this thought, he found a sense of calm. He gazed deeply at Kishiar La Orr, trying not to miss any subtle changes, as if seeing him for the first time. Kishiar's face was refreshingly handsome, warm, and consistently honest. Emotions, never felt before from anyone else, swirled captivatingly in the eyes of this beautiful, noble man, like a sweet dream.

It had taken him a long time to recognize that this Kishiar La Orr was walking a different path from the one in the past. Regardless of what others said or what happened, his vow to stay by Kishiar's

side remained unchanged. He thought he had correctly determined what was important, reflecting on the past, present, and future.

Yet, even after seemingly sorting out his past, present, and future, he couldn't maintain his usual composure when this situation arose. It meant his heart had not truly settled yet.

‘Perhaps it's because I'm always relieved to see the current Kishiar, who is unlike the one from the past.’

He felt again the weight of old emotions that he had experienced at the guillotine. These long-suppressed feelings hadn't disappeared but lingered somewhere in Yuder's heart. Yuder introspectively peered into this dark swamp, too heavy and deep to fully understand.

Bitter longing. Cold hatred.

Respect and aspiration. Resentment and anger.

An inexplicable yearning. Shadows constricting a murderer's body.

All mixed together to form Kishiar La Orr.

The only name that could shake Yuder so profoundly.

Kishiar also saw how much Yuder struggled to maintain his composure in front of this conjecture. Knowing that Yuder had no good feelings for him in his previous life, it must not have been easy for Kishiar to discuss this conjecture.

Yet, he spoke his thoughts logically and without emotion, deeming it necessary.

Yuder decided not to forget that he was here now because Kishiar was that kind of man.

‘Think simply.’

While part of his heart ached as if wounded, he didn't want to be blinded by it and miss what truly mattered.

Enduring a difficult situation wasn't unique to him alone. Kishiar, too, was enduring unfamiliar pain for Yuder.

Getting entangled in events that had nothing to do with his current self and were unlikely to happen was unpleasant for anyone. The realization that traces of a person he was yet not, existed within him was not a welcome thought.

Yet, the man never once let go of Yuder.

Suddenly, Yuder reached out and gently touched Kishiar's cheek. As his hand moved naturally over Kishiar's face, Kishiar softly grasped it, looking down submissively and rubbing his face against it. As their skin touched, their heartbeats almost synchronized.

Without expressing in words or emotions, the sound alone eased some of the pain.

"Do you not resent it?"

Yuder impulsively asked in a soft voice.

"Considering that you are entangled with me in these strange events."

"Not at all."

Kishiar immediately replied.

"I have never had such a thought, and I probably never will. The only thought I have right now is just one."

The man whispered, asking if he knew what it was. As Yuder slowly shook his head, a voice, lowered enough to be just audible, reached his ears.

"The thought of surviving well in the future, and how to see the precious laughter of the one I love for a long time."



Yuder was speechless for a while.

He wanted to ask back what it was, but a sensation like the crashing of mighty waves struck the edge of his heart.

"...Is that it?"

"What do you mean? It's a serious issue."

Kishiar usually jokes like this when he's hiding his real feelings and being evasive. But right now, he seemed to be truly sincere.

Yuder, dumbfounded, let out a strange breath that was neither a laugh nor a sigh.

"Huh..."

"Yes. Smiling suits you much better."

Kishiar smiled as if he had painted it.

"Don't worry too much. What happened this time was certainly surprising, but after all, it's a thing of the past. Even if I'm curious about the previous game, it can't be the same as back then. We both know that using the same pieces to play a game doesn't make it the same game, don't we?"

"..."

"But if you need to, you can use me, hate me, and resent me instead. I'll gladly accept whatever you give me."

"That doesn't seem right. Rather, I should..."

His playfully serious voice was amusing, but in truth, even if Yuder really did it, he would have accepted it willingly. Yuder denied his words, feeling the atmosphere rapidly soften in a surprising way.

It was Kishiar's power that changed the atmosphere like this. He skillfully embraced Yuder, who didn't know how to release his pain alone, and helped him gently push his worries to the back.

He realized just how broad-minded Kishiar was, especially at times like this. Indeed, he was an unbeatable opponent...

In the sensation of the still flickering remnants of his unextinguished heat period, Yuder recalled Kishiar in his dream.

Like an unwelcome guest hidden in the shadows, that man stood alone. The Yuder in the dream had turned his face away and did not look at him, so he didn't know what expression he was wearing, but the current Kishiar said he had read fear in him.

Was that all that the current 'Kishiar' had read from there?

He thought it was probably not.

Then, if Yuder asked the questions he had long wondered about but never had answers to, could he answer them?

"Commander."

"Yes."

As soon as he called softly, an immediate reply came. Like Yuder, he was not asleep. The sound of his heartbeat became stronger as he slightly tightened his arm around Yuder.

Yuder listened closely and then spoke.

"If, as you said earlier, the Commander of the previous game really felt fear when he saw me in the Commander uniform, then why did you..."

"..."

"No, never mind."

He intended to ask why he was appointed as the Cavalry Commander, but he felt it was strange to ask someone who was the same yet different. After all, even he wouldn't know the perfect answer.

"Just go to sleep."

As Yuder shook his head and exhaled, Kishiar inserted his fingers into his hair and stroked it. As he repeated the action for a long time, the suffocating emotions disappeared, and slowly sleep approached.

Yuder blinked several times and then finally closed his eyes completely. Even after that, the man who continued the same actions whispered as a deep darkness once again fell over the small cabin.

"...Well... Not everything can be known, but one thing is certain. In the act of making new clothes, there is an old wish embedded, hoping that the person will wear them and think of the person who made it."

It was a story originating from an old tradition, unknown to many, but Kishiar knew it.

The man who was hiding his emotions in laughter, shrouded in shadows, surely knew the same fact.

Kishiar stroked his pale cheek, still slightly flushed from the remnants of the heat period. He cuddled Yuder and then closed his eyes in a corner of the small cabin.

The winter wind blowing outside could not invade that place.

Chapter 627

Another day had passed. Yuder got up from his bed, feeling the aftereffects of the heat period had completely faded.

His body felt surprisingly light and overflowing with energy. He felt as if he could blow away the whole cabin if he wanted to.

"Have you finished cleaning up already?"

Asked Kishiar, who had come out of the cabin after finishing packing and tidying up inside. He had gone out earlier to contact Nathan Zuckerman.

"Yes. Other than a bag of blood-stained Dudureli mushrooms, there was nothing unusual. The scent that had soaked into the interior has almost been washed away, so it should all disappear in a few days."

Of course, if another second-gender Awakener came in the meantime, they would be able to sense that an Alpha and Omega Awakener had stayed here. Even so, they wouldn't be able to identify who they were. Yuder had thoroughly erased even the faint traces left around the cabin.

'It would have been easier to just destroy it and leave...'

Since important items were found in this house, it had to be preserved for evidence. If a cabin that had been fine suddenly collapsed, it would remain in people's memories, so it was better to go through the trouble in the long run.

"Did you contact Sir Nathan?"

"Yes. He said he'd wait for us at the destination."

It was good news that there were no problems on Nathan Zuckerman's end.

After nearly a week, Yuder calmly surveyed the landscape outside before leaving the cabin with Kishiar. The mercenaries they had beaten and buried were, of course, nowhere to be seen, as if they had never been there.

Kishiar explained that the Cavalry of the western branch must have come and taken them all away while they were in the cabin.

"I've given orders to detain them at the branch and extract more useful information. There was no time to properly discuss the information we got from them with you due to the situation."

"I feel the same."

It was a relief that they could finally talk about proper work now that the heat period was over. Although they hadn't completely lost the power to think and judge even when instincts were dominant, it was impossible to share complex thoughts like now.

Yuder realized through this experience that it wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but he felt more stable now that he was back to normal.

During their journey to the destination, they shared and discussed the information they had obtained from the mercenaries. The information Kishiar and Nathan had extracted from them almost matched what Yuder had found out.

"I already anticipated that forces trying to sneak in spies or disrupt the recruitment of new members would interfere. But I didn't expect the cautious Duke Diarca to move so boldly..."

"It's highly probable that he didn't bother to intervene if the sage said he would step in."

"Right. Even if they failed, they wouldn't have thought we'd completely uncover the mastermind."

"The western part probably used mercenaries because they intended to test the waters, but the real action is likely to follow in the south, where the sage's base is located."

"Did you think that far ahead?"

"If I were them, I would have done the same."

"Right. A real attack always follows after sending scouts to gauge the enemy's movement. If they're not fools, they'll choose to fight on terrain advantageous to them."

The smooth continuation of their conversation, as if sharing thoughts, brought significant pleasure and exhilaration.

With a pleasant smile, Kishiar faced Yuder and briefly expressed his judgment about the sage.

"This incident has made it clear that the sage may not be as much of a murderer as Nahan, but he's certainly not any better or good."

"True. It's certain that the sage is moving in a somewhat bold manner to expand his influence on both Duke Diarca's side and the Crown Prince's side."

If the sage manages to prove his worth in this incident, it would probably not be difficult for him to achieve his goals. With his ability to brainwash people and the varied powers of the Star of Nagran members at his disposal, one could guess how well he would use this power once he joined hands with the power players.

This was something the fake sage in his previous life had managed to do similarly.

'No way. Is it possible that I'll see that happen again?'

"As long as we have the mercenaries, there's no problem with the evidence for this incident, even if not for the palace intrusion. So..."

Looking at the signs of a village starting to appear in the distance, Yuder quietly declared.

"Let's make it so he can't even pay attention to the south."

He had no intention of letting him meddle in the south as he pleased. He would make sure to teach him how difficult it is to meddle from afar.

Seeing Yuder's eyes, dark as if casting a sinister light, Kishiar burst into laughter.

"Did I ever tell you that my heart races anew every time you say such things?"

"You would have thought the same, Commander."

"Right."

Kishiar didn't deny Yuder's words.

"Now that we're about to arrive, it seems we've decided on what to send to the western branch and the capital headquarters. I'm really looking forward to it."

## Chapter 628

"Sage. You might want to come out. Nezo went outside and has heard some troubling news!"

At the mention of troubling news, the moment Baron Renbow showed confusion, the sage stood up and opened the door. A young Awakener, Langbarton, nearly rolled in, gasping for breath.

"What do you mean by troubling news?"

"The Cavalry has spread new news throughout the capital, saying they will conduct a major investigation to find those interfering with this round of recruitment. But..."

"But what?"

Baron Renbow, who was listening, asked quickly, realizing it was a matter related to him as well.

"They said for a swift investigation, they plan to closely cooperate with Awakener groups and organizations not affiliated with the Cavalry... But, there..."

"Calm down and speak slowly, Langbarton. Who is the Cavalry planning to collaborate with?"

The sage encouraged Langbarton, whose face had turned pale. Langbarton then steeled his heart and, with trembling lips, spoke.

"...The name of Star of Nagran... was mentioned."

"What?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That is, in the list or whatever it is of external personnel they're collaborating with to investigate the forces interfering with the new round of Cavalry recruitment, our Star of Nagran was mentioned!"

Langbarton clenched his eyes shut and shouted. A terrible silence filled the room.

Baron Renbow, his face blank as he tried to understand the meaning of what he'd heard, lost the gentle smile he always wore.

"Sage, it's clear to me. We're not cooperating with them, so how can Star of Nagran possibly join forces with the Cavalry? Surely Nahan is colluding with them!"

"...Star of Nagran is what you and the sage call yourselves, isn't it? But who is this Nahan? Why such a reaction..."

Baron Renbow, his eyes full of incomprehension, alternated his gaze between Langbarton and the sage. The sage, whose smile had faded, drew a deep breath.

"Langbarton. Being too swayed by emotions can negatively affect your judgment and resolution of the situation. Calm down first. And Baron Renbow."

Baron Renbow's eyes, filled with confusion and discomfort, met with the sage's. The sage looked at him intently and whispered slowly but audibly.

"Since the first day we met, I believe there has always been a genuine exchange of hearts between you and us. Trust and reliance don't require knowing everything. Haven't you said so yourself?"

"...I have said that, yes."

The Baron hesitantly replied.



"If we continue to trust each other as we have, I believe we can overcome any difficulty that may arise. Would you trust me and return for today?"

Baron Renbow's eyes, previously full of doubt, gradually softened. The nobleman, once full of suspicion, now appeared as a trusting friend, taking the sage's hand and bowing his head.

"I understand. Something seems to have happened, so I'll return and keep an eye on things here. If there's anything I can help with, please don't hesitate to contact me."

He left the room, asking to be informed as soon as the situation was resolved. The sage turned his gaze to Langbarton, who was simmering in silence, his eyes flashing with anxiety and anger.

"Langbarton. It seems you were quite anxious today."

"...I'm sorry, sage. I was blinded by the urgency to inform you as soon as I heard the news, failing to consider that Baron Renbow does not yet fully understand us."

"It's okay. Fortunately, he trusts me deeply. He will willingly keep silent about what he heard today. Everyone can make mistakes when they are anxious. What matters is what happens next."

"Sage..."

Langbarton was once again moved by the sage's magnanimity, who did not raise his voice despite his mistake, but instead reassured him. Swallowing his pent-up emotions, Langbarton poured out the words he had been holding back.

"I thought it strange that Nahan, who should have contacted our southern base upon his arrival in the capital, had not done so. If those who broke into our previous lodgings and the theft were indeed their doing, it's hard to view their intentions positively. And now, Star of Nagran is named as a collaborator with the Cavalry!"

If Nahan had come to the capital to meet the sage, he should have first sent a message to the southern base, informing them of his arrival and establishing a connection with the sage's side.

However, he neither informed the southern base of his location nor showed any caution, instead finding out where the sage was staying and intruding uninvited. Given that the letters sent by the

southern base to the sage were lost, it seemed clear that Nahan doubted the sage's intentions and was acting on his own.

And now, today's revelation about the Cavalry's list of collaborators.

Was it a coincidence that just as the sage started moving to help Duke Diarca, the Cavalry spread such news? And that Star of Nagran was included, not in a group hindering the Cavalry but rather in a collaborating faction?

"It's absurd. If the Cavalry were to capture us, that's one thing, but how can they talk about collaboration? We don't even know who they are! And among us, who knows them best? Only Nahan!"

The Cavalry had fought several battles with the Awakeners of Star of Nagran, including Nahan. In the process, several of their brethren were captured, but the Cavalry had never officially announced the name "Star of Nagran" to the world.

Langbarton had never found this odd until today.

Nahan must already know whom the sage is currently helping.

To punish and hinder the sage, who is treating the Crown Prince and aiding Duke Diarca, wouldn't the best way be to use the Cavalry, aligned with the Emperor and hostile to both forces?

"Could it be that Nahan, who has encountered them several times, has been secretly communicating with them to hinder the sage? Maybe even the comrades from the west were all lies... If it was all Nahan's scheme?"

"But Langbarton. I have known Nahan much longer than you. Even if he doesn't want to agree with our goals, Nahan would not easily join hands with the nobility."

"I know he hates the nobility. But aren't most of the Cavalry commoner Awakeners?"

"..."

Langbarton recalled Nahan's insistence from long ago that the sage should keep his promise to him, adding credibility to his speculation.

"Sage. Do you remember when Nahan rescued other brothers from the east and brought them here? When little Josh, who can control monsters, joined us?"

"Of course, I remember."

"It was the first time our brothers encountered the Cavalry. Since then, Nahan has clashed with them several times. Was there really nothing between Nahan and the Cavalry? I believe there must have been something we don't know!"

Surely, Nahan wouldn't have sincerely joined hands with the Cavalry. But to intimidate the sage and make him comply, could he not have resorted to such measures?

After all, his goal is to leave this empire with everyone and find their own land. For that purpose, who knows if he thought it better to turn everyone into beings who couldn't live in this country?

Langbarton thought that madman could very well entertain such thoughts.

"Think about it. Who else but him would be crazy enough to collaborate with the Cavalry? Our other brothers and sisters struggling every day in hiding at the base? Or someone among us here? It's obvious. It's him. It's definitely him!"

The sage covered his eyes. He looked deeply troubled. Langbarton, recalling the conversation he had with Nezo after hearing today's news, comforted the sage.

"But don't worry, sage. We'll immediately contact the other bases to prevent chaos from this news and focus on what you wish to do. Everything will work out as you desire. We will help make that possible."

Langbarton pleaded with him not to meet Nahan, who might be lurking somewhere in the capital, no matter how worried he might be about the others.

After a while, the sage lowered his hand and patted Langbarton with a kind smile.

"...Alright. Let's do that. But even if we don't contact Nahan for now, we can't delay finding out where he might be."

This meant the sage acknowledged the validity in Langbarton and Nezo's conjectures. It pained him to think that the benevolent sage had to sense the dark intentions of Nahan, but this was the reality unfolding.

"We're already working on that. We will surely find out where they are."

The sage had taken on the difficult task of ensuring the safety of everyone at Star of Nagran. Langbarton resolved several times that they couldn't just leave the unpredictable and dangerous Nahan to his own devices.

The sage and his followers began focusing almost entirely on tracking down Nahan, setting aside other matters.

As a result, the course of events they were supposed to influence also began to twist and turn.

## Chapter 629

"Welcome. It seems you have finally recovered."

Yuder greeted Nathan Zuckerman with a nod, responding to his indifferent greeting. Nathan Zuckerman had been staying in an empty house in the village, dressed like an ordinary mercenary.

Though his face remained stoic as if nothing had happened, Yuder vaguely remembered him from the time of his heat, when only Kishiar and nothing else seemed to matter. At the time, he hadn't cared about anyone else, but looking back, he realized how embarrassing the situation must have been for Nathan.

‘But what can I do...’

What happened had happened. Even in his previous life, he had embarrassed himself before Nathan, but this time felt completely different.

This was partly due to what Kishiar had told him just before coming here.

"I hope you won't feel sorry or ashamed about Nathan. Unforeseen events can happen to anyone, and Nathan was well aware of the possibility before coming."

Yuder knew that his heat was approaching even before leaving the capital. Kishiar had included Nathan Zuckerman in the group in anticipation of such an event, and the loyal knight had perfectly handled the aftermath.

"So, when you meet Nathan again, express your gratitude, not an apology. Nathan would prefer that."

Following Kishiar's advice, Yuder decided to thank Nathan first.

"Thanks to Sir Zuckerman taking care of things, I was able to recover completely and return. Thank you."

A fleeting emotion crossed Nathan Zuckerman's dark navy eyes. The knight hesitated as if to speak, then shook his head politely.

"...No. I haven't done anything significant to deserve thanks."

"I'm curious about your standard for something significant. From my perspective, what you did was indeed significant."

"You know that's not what I mean."

"Hahaha. Anyway, thank you, Nathan."

Kishiar, with a playful glint in his eyes, smiled and patted Nathan Zuckerman's shoulder. This eased the atmosphere among the three. The casual, comfortable air felt strangely new and intriguing to Yuder, unlike when he left things in the hands of comrades like Kanna and Gakane. Entrusting someone like Nathan Zuckerman silently felt different.

Perhaps Kishiar said no more words were needed so Yuder could experience this feeling.

"Then please come in. I'll give you a proper report of what I've seen and heard in the village."

"Alright."

Nathan Zuckerman began to explain in his characteristic silent manner.

"As you've seen on your way here, this mountain village is really ordinary and small. It belongs to a lord beyond the mountains, but it's far away, and the total population barely reaches a hundred. Most residents specialize in gathering herbs unique to this place or serve travelers who come to see the famous lake atop Mount Guanamar."

"Yes, that's why I pretended to be a mercenary here to see the lake and rented this house. Wandering around daily didn't arouse much suspicion. People say this time of the year is the most beautiful."

"Hmm, winter being the peak season... That raises a peculiar point."

Kishiar looked at Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder as if he expected they had already realized this. Yuder recalled the information about the village that Kishiar had shared with him earlier.

"A few years ago, some relatives of the Diarca Duchy came here to spend the summer, you said."

"Yes."

"If it was for sightseeing, they should have come in the early winter like now, and if it was to spend the leisure summer, there would have been many other better places than here, so I'm curious as to why they came."

"Exactly."

Kishiar's eyes lit up, signaling he had found the right answer.

"I also found that suspicious and asked the villagers. Loosening their guard over drinks, many remembered them for that reason."

Nathan Zuckerman continued quietly.

"According to the villagers, they came to spend the summer but didn't seem to enjoy the surroundings much. They returned earlier than planned after a few days of touring with guides. One guide who went down to the village at the mountain's base is due back today, so I plan to meet her."

"Hmm."

Kishiar's eyes sparkled with cool interest.

"Indeed suspicious. Good. Did you also find out more about the Crown Prince refining poison mushrooms here?"

"Yes. Actually, that's the most important part I wanted to discuss."

Before continuing, Nathan Zuckerman glanced around cautiously. Despite being a swordmaster with superior senses, his vigilance showed his well-trained discipline as a knight. Yuder, having once led numerous members, highly regarded Nathan's caution.

"I decided a direct approach wouldn't be wise to uncover that matter. So, I hinted to the local herbalists about wanting to buy herbs that could be gathered around that time, asking indirectly about events during that period."

"A wise approach. So, what happened then?"

"A villager had died."

Nathan Zuckerman replied with an expressionless face.

"One herbalist went out to gather herbs and was found brutally murdered in the mountains. It was right before the harvest festival. Soldiers sent by the lord concluded he was killed by a beast, but the villagers seemed to think otherwise."

"They suspected murder?"

"Yes."

According to Nathan, the unfortunate herbalist who died around the harvest time was a young man born and raised in the village. He was cheerful and well-regarded among the villagers, with no known personal grudges.

"This Mount Guanamar doesn't have beasts dangerous enough to harm people. There were no similar incidents before or after the herbalist's death."

If it were a dangerous place, nobles wouldn't come to see the lake. Most nobles Yuder knew always frequented only the safest and most comfortable places.

"The villagers mentioned that before his death, the herbalist frequently went down the mountain to meet someone. He said it was a merchant to sell herbs to, but no one in the village had ever seen this merchant."

"A mysterious herb merchant who's never been seen and a murdered herbalist."

There was a highly suspicious air about it. Everyone was likely thinking the same thing.

"I assumed the merchant's identity might be linked to the servant the Crown Prince had sent to the village and tried to dig deeper, but those I met knew nothing about it. However, someone suggested the deceased's family might know."

"Have you met his family?"

Yuder asked. Nathan Zuckerman shook his head.

"That person is the same one I mentioned earlier, who had guided the Diarca relatives. That's why I haven't met her yet."

"She was supposed to return today, wasn't she?"

Kishiar interjected.



"Yes."

"That's fortunate. We should join you when you meet her."

Yuder recalled the blood-stained Dudureli mushroom sack he brought from the cabin. It was well-packed and stored in his baggage.

Chapter 630

‘A dead herbalist. And the blood-stained mushroom bag we found...’

The feeling came. Finally, a strong sensation of having found the owner of that mushroom bag.

"Sir Zuckerman, may I ask you something?"

"Yes, I will answer if I know the information."

"Do you know where the supposedly dead herbalist was found?"

Nathan Zuckerman's eyes narrowed slightly upon hearing Yuder's question. It was not out of ignorance, but rather a reaction of someone who grasped the implication hidden in the question.

"It seems you have a guess..."

"I do, but I will tell you after hearing your answer. Is the place near the cabin where I stayed?"

Yuder waited for the knight's response.

After a moment, Nathan Zuckerman slowly nodded his head.

"Yes, the dead herbalist was found right in front of the resting place of the herbalists where you two stayed."

Just as thought.

A sharp thrill ran down his spine, confirming his suspicions.

"Since then, the village's herbalists rarely go there. Even the children in the village are forbidden from playing in that direction."

"No wonder. I thought you, Nathan, were using some mysterious means to keep people away during our stay, but it seems that was not the case."

Kishiar joked with a smile, but his eyes, unlike his lips, were serious and focused on Yuder. He clearly shared Yuder's thoughts.

The existence of the herbalist's resting place meant there were enough active herbalists to need such a place. However, no one had disturbed them during Yuder's heat period. Yuder, preoccupied and not venturing outside, hadn't felt this oddity, but Kishiar must have.

'To think there was such a secret behind no one approaching the cabin.'

The feeling was similar to when he found the blood-stained bag. The shadow of death, which Crown Prince Katchian tried to bury forever, was still present there.

"Now, please tell me. Why is the location where the dead herbalist was found important?"

Yuder searched his bag and showed Nathan Zuckerman the blood-stained bag.

"This is something I found among the junk while staying there."

As soon as he took a look at the outside of the bag and the inside containing the Dudureli mushrooms, he immediately realized what it meant.

"This is..."

"What are the chances that the person who left this behind is not the dead herbalist?"

Yuder was confident that the dead herbalist was indeed the owner of the blood-stained bag. Given that the herbalist had met a strange merchant, likely a servant sent by the Crown Prince, he now knew exactly what to ask the herbalist's family.

"Now, we can only hope that this family has enough information to satisfy our queries."

Kishiar looked out the window with a chilly smile.

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"Marin! Have you just returned?"

A person entering the village stopped at the call of an elderly man. From under a deeply worn hat, a weary and harsh voice responded.

"Yes."

"Tsk tsk. You seem even thinner than before you left. If you haven't eaten yet, why don't you come over to my house? Syll and Reimi would be glad to see you."

Observing the old man's expression filled with sorrowful sympathy, the person known as Marin pressed her lips together tightly for a moment. She soon shook her head, indicating her refusal.

"No, thank you for your offer, but I'm fine. I've just returned and am tired, so I plan to go straight home."

"Well, then, there's nothing I can do. Oh, but there are visitors at your house right now."

"Visitors? I'm not expecting anyone."

"They're mercenary travelers. They're looking for dried Perdy grass, and I thought you might have some extra at your house. Before your brother Mikey passed away, he had collected quite a lot of it. Since he left so suddenly, I thought you might still have some not yet disposed of..."

At the mention of her deceased brother's name, deep pain welled up in Marin's eyes.

She half-listened to the old man's next words before turning away to walk to her house.

The herbs her brother had gathered before his death were indeed still at the house. However, she had no desire to pass them on to anyone else.

'Whoever that person is... if they are really waiting, I'll just have to reject them right away.'

Before long, Marin spotted three tall shadows standing in front of her dilapidated house. Each one was armed with a sword, unmistakably mercenaries. She had thought the old man referred to a single mercenary, but it seemed there were more in the group.

Two of the three had somewhat vague appearances, but Marin didn't find this particularly strange. Since her brother's death, she had lost much of her interest in others.

She also failed to notice that one man with black hair and a pale face had been staring at her with a hint of discovery since the first moment he saw her face.

"The homeowner has finally returned."

The tallest of the men stepped forward, unfolding his arms. He had ordinary brown hair and eyes, an unremarkable appearance, yet his smiling face had a warm charm. His confident smile, as if he was used to charming people, only made Marin more wary.

"You have extra Perdy grass in this house, right?"

"I don't know. Even if I do, I'm not planning to give it away, so please leave."

"Hmm. You seem very tired. Then, if I visit again tomorrow, can we talk..."

"Not tomorrow, not ever. I told you not to come back."

Marin turned to enter her house, but another voice from behind stopped her.

"You, you're an Awakener."

Her hand, reaching to push the door, froze in mid-air. Slowly, Marin turned her head to look at the man who had spoken. The man with black hair looked at her with inscrutable, deep black eyes and spoke again.

"The ability to grow thorny bushes. That's right, isn't it?"

"What are you people?"

Marin quickly stepped back. Her eyes flickered anxiously between the three men. Cold sweat formed on the back of her neck, but she did not show her emotion and tightly gripped the dagger at her waist.

She had no confidence in facing three robust mercenaries alone, but she wouldn't die in vain if it came to that. Using her ability and the dagger together...

"Well, I understand you're startled, but there's no need to be so defensive. It seems better to just get to the point."

The man with black hair exchanged a meaningful look with the tall brown-haired man, who still had a smile on his face as he spoke.

"Like me, I am also an Awakener, so I can recognize another Awakener. The grass is just an excuse; we are actually looking for information about someone who tried to take processed Dudureli mushrooms from this village a few months ago."

"Processed Dudureli mushrooms?"

Marin reacted immediately to the mention of the mushrooms. Her grip on the dagger's handle unexpectedly loosens. The brown-haired man, quickly noticing this, nods with a benign and harmless smile.

"Yes, and according to what we've gathered so far, it seems likely that your brother was unfortunately involved in this. Would you mind having a brief talk about it? It will only take a moment," he proposes, adding, "Of course, only if you're interested in the 'truth'."

This addition by the man stirs something in Marin. Eventually, she opens her clenched lips to speak in a dry voice, "If you seek to know what happened to Mikey, anyone is welcome. Please, come in."

Entering a cold, dilapidated house that seemed uninhabited for months, Yuder intently observes Marin lighting a lantern.

"I never expected to encounter the 'Thornbush Marin' here," Yuder muses to himself.

In his past life, he had met her. It wasn't a pleasant acquaintance.

Known as 'Thornbush Marin', she was an Awakener mercenary who could rapidly grow various dangerous plants and trees, including thornbushes laced with poison.

During a time when Emperor Katchian was tightening his grip on the four dukedoms, including the Diarca, to strengthen his authority, she was hired to assassinate the Emperor at an external event. However, her attempt was thwarted by Yuder. Impressively, she managed to escape through the encirclement of the Cavalry, leaving a deep impression on Yuder.

Years later, she reappeared at a place later called the Red Field. As one of the key figures opposing the Emperor's tyranny, her name became even more notorious for a terrifying combat style involving poison-laden thornbushes that grew through people's bodies.

Eventually, she fell to a joint operation of knights sent by Emperor Katchian, the imperial army, and the Cavalry, disappearing from history.

Yuder couldn't fail to recognize the intense face of that Awakener.

It was astonishing to meet Thornbush Marin here in such a vulnerable state, having been someone whose hometown and identity remained a mystery to everyone in his previous life.