

Turning 631

Chapter 631

"Refined Dudureli mushrooms... I don't know how much you know or how far you've come, but yes. It was indeed those mushrooms that my younger brother Mikey was last gathering."

Marin slumped wearily into an old chair. As she removed her pressed-down hat, her coarse black hair cascaded over her shoulders. She continued speaking, leaving her tousled hair as it was.

"And I did think that if someone were to kill Mikey, it would most likely be the unfamiliar merchant he had met before his death. After Mikey's death, I scoured the village below the mountain to find this person, but to no avail."

"The lord said that Mikey was killed by a beast."

"You've heard that too? Ha. Right. Such a shitty story."

Anger flickered in Marin's eyes.

"Anyone could see he was stabbed to death, but they made up a story about a monster to pretend to hunt it down. They brushed it off simply because it was bothersome. With such nonsense passed off as the investigation's result, Mikey couldn't rest in peace even in death!"

As Yuder witnessed the flame of hatred rising in her tired face, he reaffirmed that this bramble-covered Marin was indeed the one he remembered.

"So, what do you know about this merchant?"

Kishiar asked calmly and softly. After a moment of silence, Marin muttered with bloodshot eyes.

"Not much."

"Not much?"

"As infuriating as it is... I had been outside the village since a few days before Mikey's death. I only learned that he was meeting with a stranger after he died."

After hearing of her brother's death, Marin hurried back to the village and exhausted all her efforts to find the culprit. However, the most likely suspect had already vanished, and the lord only offered a conclusion that it was the act of a beast, showing little initiative. For him, the death of an ordinary villager in a small hamlet was of little concern, but the neglect was excessive.

The villagers mourned Mikey's unfortunate accident, but some whispered that he had suffered for trying to sell something bad. Even though they grew up in the same village and knew better. Baseless rumors about Mikey being cursed also circulated, and people avoided the place where his body was found, fearing a similar fate.

With no leads on the culprit and nowhere to turn, Marin grew rapidly weary and wandered aimlessly. The realization that there was nothing more she could do was truly powerless.

Even today, before returning to the village, she had been helping others at the foot of the mountain, trying to find a way to clear her brother's name. But she failed again and returned, shattered.

"Mikey wasn't like that. He wasn't the type to take risks selling something out of greed, whether for money or anything else."

"Then let's change the question."

The man with brown hair, looking steadily into Marin's bloodshot eyes, changed his question.

"Before your brother died, when he was gathering Dudureli mushrooms, didn't you find anything strange? Even if you didn't see the merchant yourself, your brother must have had a few contacts for the trade. Any memories from around that time would be helpful."

"..."

Marin, frowning in silence, bit her lip and struggled to continue speaking.

"Mikey was not the type to often talk about whom he was meeting or trading with... I don't remember much about that. But... I do recall wondering why he was picking and drying mushrooms that wouldn't even sell for much money."

Dudureli mushrooms were weakly poisonous mushrooms sometimes used by poor commoners. Although not particularly difficult to find, they were not valuable and hardly sold for money. Even herb shops, which dealt with a variety of herbs, often refused to purchase them, as they were considered worthless.

As he suddenly started collecting and drying a lot of them, she had asked him whom he was planning to give them to when she passed by, not thinking that he intended to sell them.

"And what did he answer?"

"He just smiled awkwardly. He didn't give any answer."

Mikey had a fondness for flowers and grass. Observing seemingly useless grasses had been his hobby since childhood. So Marin had assumed that this was just another part of his hobby.

"...Ah. Now that I think about it, he did say something else."

A faint memory suddenly surfaced in her torn heart.

"Mikey said... that an old friend had contacted him after a long time and that he might meet them soon. I didn't respond, thinking it was nonsense, and soon left home..."

Yes. He had said that, but it was such an everyday conversation that she had forgotten it. As Marin's expression distorted, the man with brown hair asked again.

"Did your brother have many friends?"

"Not many, but... he was pretty much friends with all the kids who grew up in this village. Now, many of them have gone down to the towns below the mountain or to big cities like Tainu for work. There aren't many left in the village, just a few who gather herbs like the adults or cater to tourists."

"Then you must have thought he planned to meet one of those friends."

"I did."

"If they had made plans to meet, did any of them contact you after your brother's death?"

"No."

"Is it possible your brother had a friend you didn't know about?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

Marin nodded without hesitation.

"I'm sure."

The man with brown hair stared intently at Marin, as if he could discern any falsehood in her words just by looking.

‘He was said to be an Awakener too.’

Could he have the ability to discern truth from lies? His eyes, usually vague, felt very heavy and sharp in that moment, but Marin did not shrink in front of this strange intimidation. She was too weary to be frightened by anything.

After a while, the man with brown hair turned his gaze to the others. They exchanged opinions with just a look, then suddenly asked a completely different question.

"There's actually one more thing we wanted to ask you."

"What is it?"

"Do you remember... a few years ago, when nobles came to spend the summer in this village? I heard that you guided them."

"Summer... I remember. Why?"

It was rare for people to come to see the lake in summer. The water level of the lake at the top of the mountain would drop significantly under the hot sun, making the surroundings terribly humid. Marin thought it was as good as liking to be whipped, choosing to enjoy an environment far from coolness in already hot weather. It was a truly unique experience, and so were the events that followed, so of course, she remembered.

As Marin recalled the nobles who had visited back then, a significant and secretive incident from that time suddenly came to mind.

"The fact that these people, who are looking for the one who traded Dudureli mushrooms, are now suddenly asking about the nobles who visited... Does it mean there's a connection? Then... wait a minute. Could it be?"

Marin's expression changed drastically. Yuder, too, was closely observing her face, which she couldn't hide.

'That's not the face of someone who just guided them. There must have been something more.'

"You're not just asking this out of curiosity, are you? What is it? Why such questions....."

Marin, leaning her hands on the table, suddenly stood up. However, Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman, who had temporarily changed their appearances with magic, along with Yuder, all remained seated without any sign of disturbance.

"Yes, we're not just asking. We believe that one of the nobles who visited this village a few years ago is connected to your brother's recent death. In fact, we suspect that person is responsible for killing your brother."

The man with brown hair, Kishiar, lifted the corners of his lips with his transformed face.

"So, your answer here is very important. Our guess as to why the deceased was collecting and preparing worthless mushrooms and meeting with merchants will depend on your response."

"..."

"Didn't you say you wanted the truth? So do we. I won't presume to understand the feelings of someone who lost a brother overnight, but I promise to make the person who did this pay. That's why we're here."

"..."

"As of now, you're the only person who can give us an answer."

After looking at them for a long time, Marin finally collapsed back into her seat. Her lips, buried between her hands, let out heavy, restrained breaths.

Kishiar patiently waited a long time for her to speak.

And finally, a locked voice flowed from Marin.

"Exactly, it was the summer five years ago. The time when those nobles visited. The incident that happened then, the 'old friend' Mikey mentioned meeting after a long time... and the Dudureli mushrooms. I know one person who could connect all three."

"Who is that?"

"Katchian. He was a friend of Mikey's."

Suddenly, Yuder felt a lightning-like sensation rushing down his spine.

Putting together the information heard along the way, he had speculated that Katchian must be connected to this village. But the truth was always more surprising.

In the village, the child was known as 'Little Kitchi.' Much smaller and weaker than his peers, frequent illnesses had sharpened his temperament, making it hard for him to blend in with other children. However, he often played with Mikey, finding solace in his company.

According to Marin's recollection, 'Little Kitchi' was a child brought back to the village by a resident who worked far away. He had no mother from the start, only a father, a situation not unusual in the village, so people didn't question it much.

Marin remembered 'Little Kitchi' as the neighbor's child who, like a boss, led his bigger and taller younger brother around, roaming the hills. Despite his size, Mikey, known for his good nature, always played happily with Kitchi, regardless of the circumstances.

Thanks to this, 'Little Kitchi,' usually as tight-lipped as a clam in front of others, gradually opened up to Mikey, sharing his secretive stories.

"Sister, to dye hair black, should I use Kubal grass instead of Nubil grass?"

"Yes, but why ask? Dyeing herbs are harsh, and kids shouldn't touch them."

"I'm not dyeing my hair. But Kitchi said there's a cheaper herb for dyeing than buying dye, and I got curious."

"The neighbor kid? Wasn't his hair always black?"

"Ah..."

Startled, the younger brother glanced around nervously. Marin, playfully pressing him for information, learned that the neighbor's black hair was the result of diligent monthly dyeing, a fact unknown to anyone else in the village.

"Don't tell anyone what I said, sister. If Kitchi finds out, he'll be mad."

"How silly. Why be scared of one little bratty kid getting angry?"

"Oh, sister..."

Amused by her brother's flustered demeanor, Marin decided to keep the newfound secret to herself.

"Enough with the herbs and stop teaching the neighbor kid useless things. Remember the trouble you caused with the Dudureli mushrooms? If it happens again, both of you are in trouble."

"But... Alright. I'll be quiet."

Over time, Marin learned more about the boy next door.

Little Kitchi, it turned out, originally had golden hair, and his mother was still alive. A remarkable woman, too busy to care for her child, had entrusted him to his father.

As Mikey realized his sister kept his secrets, he occasionally shared stories about his friend. To Marin, five years their senior, these tales seemed frivolous and fanciful.

"Kitchi says when he's grown, his mother from the East will come to get him. Isn't that amazing?"

"Sure, very impressive."

"His real name isn't Little Kitchi, you know. That's just a nickname from his father. Kitchi doesn't like it; he prefers the name his mother gave him."

"Well, having 'Little Kitchi' as a name is a bit odd. It means 'little bird,' right? So, what's the great kid's real name?"

"Katchian."

"Hmm."

Marin, quick-witted since childhood and skilled at catering to tourists, knew more than most her age.

If these grandiose claims were true, she concluded there was only one possibility.

The bratty neighbor kid was likely of noble blood. But not all those of noble blood were necessarily noble in stature.

If the boy truly were of noble birth, his father wouldn't have come to this remote mountain village to struggle alone raising him. The monthly hair dyeing must have been to conceal the boy's lineage, for it was said that true nobles could be recognized by their hair and eye color. Little Kitchi's eyes, black but appearing red in bright light, already made him stand out.

The boy seemed to genuinely believe that his mother would one day come to take him away from this impoverished village. But could such a thing really happen?

"He's probably clinging to that belief to feel like he's noble. Let's leave him be. When he grows up, he'll understand the value of his life and keep quiet."

Marin had thought so and paid it no further mind.

The memory resurfaced years later when unfamiliar nobles visited the village to spend the summer.

"These people were different from the start. While I guided them, they showed little interest in anything but the villagers, especially the children."

It seemed they found young Marin easier to deal with than adults, bombarding her with questions. Quickly sensing their motives, Marin played the fool, feigning forgetfulness each time they handed her money. Appearing thrilled with a few silver coins, she groveled, and the nobles let down their guard.

"We're curious. Is there a blond-haired child in this village? Even a passing glimpse would be helpful."

Based on their subtle inquiries, Marin quickly pieced together their objective.

They were searching for a blond boy not born in this village. Though they didn't elaborate, it was clear they didn't intend to treat the boy as a mere plaything.

Pretending not to understand their conversations, Marin caught a few key words. A noble was searching for a lost young boy, planning to adopt him if found. They were certain the boy would have blond hair...

Nobility. Blond hair. Lost child. Adoption.

Then, Marin remembered a story her brother had told her long ago. It seemed unlikely, but if Little Kitchi was the one they were seeking, it would be nothing short of the miracle he had hoped for.

Marin wrestled with whether to inform Kitchi. Eventually, realizing the choice wasn't hers to make, she casually mentioned it to her brother Mikey.

If Mikey relayed the message correctly, Little Kitchi would soon realize the visiting nobles might be looking for him.

Days passed.

The nobles, who had planned to stay until summer's end, suddenly packed up and left. They departed with satisfied smiles, and behind them stood Little Kitchi, newly employed as their errand boy. They praised his appearance and manners, announcing plans to take him for further training.

Kitchi, despite his temper, was undeniably handsome, so everyone accepted their explanation. Though still young, he had landed a position in a fine place – it seemed his fortune had turned.

However, Marin remembered the muffled arguments from the neighboring house over the past few days. On the day the boy's father, who had raised him so preciousy, saw his son leave with the nobles, he didn't even come out to bid farewell.

Despite the situation, the boy's expression showed no sign of disappointment or regret. With firmly pressed red lips and squared shoulders, he ignored Mikey, who came running late with a flower for him, and descended the mountain without a backward glance.

"Kitchi! Kitchi! Wait!"

...

"Kitchi!"

The way he acted, as if he couldn't wait to leave this place, was cold and cruel, especially after having spent so long there.

Thus, Kitchi left the village. His father, left to live alone, soon moved down the mountain, where he drowned his sorrows in alcohol every day until he disappeared. People thought he went to meet his son. Marin thought so too.

As time passed, the villagers soon forgot about Little Kitchi and his father.

Marin, having lost both parents to illness, now solely responsible for her younger brother, also ceased to actively recall them. That was, until this very moment.

...

After Marin finished her brief narrative, a cold silence filled the small house. Still covering her face with her hands, she continued speaking.

"Mikey always enjoyed identifying the properties of insignificant herbs and mushrooms. Kitchi... Katchian, preferred to play tricks with them. I remember when they were young, they ground up Dudureli mushrooms and mixed it into the village's communal water supply as a prank. It almost caused serious harm to an elderly man. It was a dangerously reckless incident."

The mushroom wasn't originally that potent, but Mikey had discovered a more advanced way of processing it beyond its traditional use. This incident had caught the attention of the village herbalists, leading Mikey into a life of herbalism, a memory that Marin still retained.

"I thought Katchian had become the adopted son of some noble family, never to contact us again. But if he had ever reached out to Mikey, wanting Dudureli mushrooms refined like they did back then... Mikey would definitely have helped him."

"I thought Katchian had become the adopted son of some noble family, never to contact us again. But if he had ever reached out to Mikey, wanting Dudureli mushrooms refined like they did back then... Mikey would definitely have helped him."

Her story carried no hint of falsehood. Even considering her past life's memories, this was evident. In her previous existence, the unexplained events and mysteries surrounding her life only became clear after hearing this tale. Likely, after losing her brother, Marin had left the village to start a life as a mercenary.

‘She must have learned of Emperor Katchian’s identity later on.’

Perhaps she hadn't known his true identity until she came to assassinate the Emperor who had left the palace for a sojourn. It was common for commoners not to know the names of royalty or nobility. To them, the Emperor was just the Emperor, a distant figure whose name held no significance in their everyday lives.

Marin, seen through the eyes of Yuder in the thorny bushes, seemed too quick to abandon her attempt at assassinating the Emperor, almost as if she was fleeing. Considering her later displayed hatred and persistence towards the Emperor, her quick surrender at that time was somewhat questionable. If Marin had recognized Katchian in that moment, her retreat in confusion would have made sense.

She would have then started seeking revenge, certain about who had killed her brother. Although that journey ended in tragic downfall, what about this life?

‘She must avoid the same fate as in her last life.’

Yuder resolved to help her avoid walking the same path. His decision stemmed from more than just sympathy. Having deviated from his previous life's path, he wanted to offer her the same chance.

‘Speaking of which, her brother was a loss. He would have been a valuable asset if discovered earlier, not just for her but for others too.’

In his previous life, Katchian had carried out numerous assassinations using the thirst-inducing Dudureli mushrooms combined with other poisons. Using a weak poison first, followed by a stronger secondary poison that the victim would ingest themselves, was a cunning strategy. It allowed him to remain bold amidst numerous suspicions and doubts. Many nobles feared being poisoned in such a manner, recognizing the Emperor as not just a young ruler but a cold, ruthless

strategist. Essentially, this poison had been a significant factor in Emperor Katchian reasserting his political power.

The new method of refining a seemingly worthless mushroom.

The intricate combination of two different poisons, a knowledge not easily conceived by anyone but an expert in poisons and plants.

If indeed Marin's brother had discovered all this, he would have been recognized as a remarkable talent. He was not meant to be just a village herbalist. Had he been alive, Yuder would have immediately taken him to Enon.

‘Everyone thought it was Emperor Katchian’s knowledge, but it was actually this?’

Recalling the bloodstained Dudureli mushroom sack he had found brought a bitter taste to his mouth.

"Honestly, as I spoke, I hoped you would say it wasn't him. But seeing your reactions, it seems I wasn't mistaken."

After hearing everything about Katchian, Marin muttered to the three unshaken listeners.

"The man who killed my brother. It's really him, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Kishiar answered calmly. At the same time, flames seemed to ignite in Marin's eyes.

"The merchant Mikey met, that was someone sent by him, wasn't it? Where is he now? Are you following Katchian? Why? What brings you to this, and who are you?"

"Let's answer one question at a time. But before that, you should know that knowing these answers might put your life in danger. We will protect you, but..."

"I don't care about that. Do you think I fear death now? Just tell me!"

Marin slammed the table, causing a cup to topple and roll onto the floor, but Kishiar remained composed. He took a quiet breath, holding Marin's gaze. Even a simple eye contact seemed to calm the raging emotions within Marin.

When she had settled enough to listen, Kishiar finally spoke.

"Katchian La Orr. That's the name he bears now."

"Katchian... La Orr? La Orr, as in... imperial family member?"

"Yes. Precisely, the current Crown Prince of the Orr Empire."

"The Crown Prince? That little Kitchi, no, Katchian?"

"A few years ago, His Majesty the Emperor held tests for exceptional children from noble families to select an adopted heir. Do you remember?"

Breathless and in disbelief, Marin finally nodded, a faint frown forming as she recalled.

"Yes. I think I remember... People who came to see the lake talked about it. They were betting on which noble's child would win... But you're saying Kitchi was that child?"

"He matched the age and description. Katchian left this village five years ago. The tests for the Crown Prince happened about a year after that. He represented the Diarca Ducal family, one of the largest powers in the East. His biological mother is known to be the daughter born from the second wife of the current Duke Diarca's cousin."

And coincidentally, as soon as it was certain that Katchian would win and be adopted by the Emperor, his biological mother died in an accident. His biological father had been out of the picture since he first entered high society under the Diarca family's name.

Even without parents, his lineage, a continuation of the Diarca bloodline, and his flawless physical traits made his adoption unproblematic.

"Those in the know probably thought Katchian's parents were conveniently disposed of by the Diarca faction... But who would delve deeper?"

No one suspected there was more to Katchian La Orr's background. It had always been so.

Kishiar didn't elaborate further, but it was enough for Marin to recall 'Katchian with a mother in the East.'

"A few months ago, at the end of the harvest festival, Crown Prince Katchian poisoned someone from another noble family at a party. He used the Dudureli mushroom combined with another poison."

"The Dudureli mushroom... That's impossible... Around harvest time, that's when Mikey was killed..."

"Yes. All the circumstances fit together well."

Marin's eyes shook violently. Clenching her fists, she finally asked with a voice trembling with anger.

"So, was the poisoning revealed, and what happened after?"

"There was no punishment whatsoever."

"What? He didn't face any punishment for his crime?"

"Officially, the Crown Prince wasn't the one who committed the crime."

A cold smile flickered at the corners of Kishiar's lips.

"The crime was pinned on a servant who had gone to procure the mushrooms on behalf of the Crown Prince, and the case was closed. However, we were curious why the Crown Prince specifically needed a little-known mushroom from a small village in the west, with which he had no apparent connection. That's what brought us here."

"So, you... Are you nobility too? Are you adversaries of Kitchi... the Crown Prince?"

Revealing his true identity in response could put Kishiar at risk. Yuder considered stepping in on his behalf but then decided against it, seeing the look in Kishiar's eyes as he gazed at Marin.

Kishiar, with a look of earnest longing for the truth, quietly observed Marin, who was looking up at him intently. Then, slowly, he moved his hand and rotated the bracelet that had been altering his appearance, deactivating the magic.

The magic that had blurred his face, hair, and eyes washed away, revealing his original golden hair, red eyes, and face.

He introduced himself properly to the wide-eyed Marin.

"I am Kishiar La Orr, the Commander of the Emperor's Cavalry. I apologize for the late introduction."

His manner of speaking, casual like that of an ordinary mercenary until now, transformed, regaining its inherent elegance.

A shiver, similar yet entirely different from the one Yuder felt when he first heard Katchian's name from Marin, ran from his heart to the tips of his fingers and toes.

Marin, witnessing the same scene, emitted a breathless sound.

"The Cavalry... the one made up only of Awakeners?"

"Yes, you're informed."

Kishiar smiled and extended his hand towards her.

"We are currently touring the country for the second recruitment of the Cavalry members. If you think our goals align in the future, would you consider applying?"

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"We are currently touring the country for the second recruitment of the Cavalry members. If you think our goals align in the future, would you consider applying?"

This proposal, unbeknownst to Marin, was exactly what Yuder had intended to offer. He had planned to approach her later, believing that enlisting Marin would be beneficial for the future of the Cavalry. However, Kishiar's initiative rendered Yuder's plan unnecessary.

It was clear that Kishiar had already completed his assessment and recognized her potential based on Yuder's reaction, who already knew of Marin's abilities.

'Everything becomes simpler once it's out in the open,' Yuder thought to himself.

As he was thinking that, Kishiar, who caught his eye, grinned quietly. It was a look of satisfaction, aware that this was what Yuder had desired.

Unnoticed by himself, Yuder's eyes softened slightly.

"Joining the Cavalry, you say... Well," Marin pondered. Contrary to expectations of immediate refusal or anger, Marin did not dismiss the offer outright. She regained her composure quickly after the initial shock and studied Kishiar's face thoughtfully before letting out a deep sigh.

"I've heard about the Cavalry's remarkable feats in the west. Even in this remote area, those tales were the talk of the town."

"Is that so?"

"But isn't the Cavalry filled with exceptional warriors capable of defeating monsters as large as houses alone? I doubt I'd pass the test even if our goals align. I've never... done anything like that in my life."

Marin couldn't have imagined that one of those 'exceptional warriors' was present among them. While Yuder remained silent, Kishiar let out a light-hearted laugh.

"Why are you laughing?" Marin asked, puzzled.

"No reason. I'm just glad you're not completely opposed to joining. My proposal wasn't based solely on shared goals. I believe you have the qualities befitting the Cavalry," Kishiar explained.

"Me?" Marin was understandably surprised, not grasping the reason behind Kishiar's confidence.

"I won't say I'm helpless in a fight. I help out the mercenaries in the neighboring village occasionally. But as for my awakened abilities... they're just enough to sprout a blade of grass. Hardly useful against even the smallest monster."

"Do you really think so?"

"Are you suggesting otherwise? You haven't even seen my abilities."

Kishiar's lips curved into a meaningful smile.

"Not having seen doesn't mean I don't know. If you doubt my judgment, the very person who recently defeated a monster alone in the west is here. Why not discuss your potential and possibilities with him?"

"Really?"

"The ability to discern an Awakener's potential and the skill to teach are, frankly, even greater in this person than in me as the Commander."

With these grand words, Kishiar's face broke into a wide grin as he gestured towards his associate.

"Allow me to introduce my assistant, Sir Yuder Aile. A leading figure in the Cavalry, recently praised for single-handedly defeating a giant monster and granted the title of Baron."

Marin's eyes widened with a different kind of surprise from when she first saw Kishiar's true form.

'...That person?'

Beside the strikingly handsome man, a pale and somber-looking man had been sitting quietly, who didn't resemble the incredible Awakener of the rumors. People often speculated that to defeat a giant monster alone, one must possess immense size and strength, but Yuder Aile was a stark contrast to such vague imaginations.

Though tall, he was not a man of bursting muscles. His expressionless face radiated not the arrogance of the strong, but a tranquility akin to the chill of dawn. It was almost doubtful whether he was capable of real emotion.

That this man, of commoner origins and now adorned with a last name, had made his name known across the continent was remarkable.

'But it was he who recognized my abilities without even seeing them. What kind of power does he possess?'

Marin looked at Yuder with a mix of curiosity and caution, to which Yuder responded quietly.

"There's no need to overthink. Probably, you're the only one who underestimates your abilities."

What? As Marin questioned her ears, his toneless voice continued.

"If you're refusing because you don't want to join the Cavalry, that's one thing. But there's no need to be scared thinking you lack the ability. With your power, you wouldn't easily lose, be it in the Cavalry or elsewhere."

"Didn't you hear what I said? I can only sprout a blade of grass."

"Even grass has its own worth."

His slightly slower speech somehow made his words more impactful, as if they were etching into her mind.

"There are many plants in the world. Some are tough and hard to cut, others are so poisonous that a mere touch can be lethal. Your brother knew well that plants are not always fragile."

Marin's fingers twitched on the table.

"But I've never grown anything that remarkable."

"Never having tried and being unable to are different things."

His eyes, dark as the night, seemed to peer into Marin's soul. She found herself drawn into his words.

"Your power depends on how well you know plants. And you had a brother who knew them well. That's an ideal condition to develop your ability. I assure you, if you join the Cavalry and endure a year, you could win against most of the members in a duel."

It sounded unbelievable, but part of her wanted to believe.

Until now, she had considered her power useless, especially since her awakening followed her brother's death. Marin had never revealed her awakening to anyone in the village. She considered it an unlucky ability she wished to hide forever.

But if what he said was true...

"Really? You're not just saying this to persuade me?"

"Why would I lie in this situation?"

True. To Marin, this opportunity was significant, but to him, she was just one of many ordinary Awakeners, not worth the effort of deceit.

Yet, Marin felt that he genuinely wanted to convince her. It was hard to believe, but it seemed true.

Her eyes, sharpened by years of catering to various guests, flickered in confusion.

"Alright, I understand. But may I take some more time to think about it? It feels too hasty to decide right now," Marin said with hesitation.

"There's no rush," Kishiar replied with a gentle smile, watching her thoughtfully.

He reassured Marin that she could take her time to think, and then, on the spot, he wrote a note bearing his signature. It was a token that any member of the Cavalry would recognize as Kishiar's.

"If you make up your mind, take this to the Cavalry's Western Branch in Tainu. Show it to Branch Head Emun Philang, and he will assist you with whatever you need."

Marin slowly nodded and accepted the note.

Yuder, observing Marin as she carefully examined the note, presented her with one last item.

"Oh, this is..."

"This helped us on our journey here. I believe it belongs to Mikey," Yuder explained, handing her a blood-stained mushroom sack.

Marin closed her eyes tightly as she recognized the old, discolored blood on the otherwise worn and ordinary sack. It was a family's intuition to recognize a belonging. For her, it was no different.

"Yes, it's Mikey's. I thought it had been discarded somewhere in the mountains since I couldn't find it when I arrived... Where did you find this?"

"We found it at a herbalist's rest stop."

The realization that her brother's last traces were so close twisted Marin's brow, but instead of succumbing to anger like before, she gripped the sack tightly, holding back the surge of emotions.

Yuder sensed that this composed demeanor was more akin to her true self, a reflection of her life here.

"This sack could serve as evidence of the Crown Prince's deeds, so we need to take it with us. But we thought it right to show it to you first."

"If you hadn't planned to take it, I would have insisted you do," Marin said firmly, handing the sack back to Yuder.

"I'll visit the place you mentioned when I can. I have things to settle and finish up here, so I can't leave right away."

Yuder, along with Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman, then left Marin's house. Marin had informed them of the location where little Kitchi had lived, but they found it had long since become a ruined, empty house.

Like their arrival, they departed the village quietly.

Chapter 635

Amidst the journey to trace the footsteps of Prince Katchian, an unexpected yet significant discovery was made.

During the brief interval when Nathan Zuckerman was away, Yuder succinctly relayed to Kishiar the tale of 'Thornbush Marin.' Kishiar showed more interest in the Red Field Riot, where Marin last fought and fell, than in the fact that she had attempted to assassinate the Emperor of Katchian.

"It seems there was considerable dissatisfaction with the 'Emperor's Decree' at that time. Did such incidents continue afterward?"

"No. That was the most significant uprising, and afterward, stricter regulations and numerous disasters prevented any large-scale events from occurring again."

The Red Field Riot was an uprising initiated by the destitute of the western regions, devastated by the colossal Pethuamet and monster hordes, and the southern imperial citizens struggling with illegal fighting rings and rampant drug problems. They swelled in number, protesting against the Emperor and nobility for failing to address these issues properly.

As their numbers grew, control became impossible. Like Marin, who had solely targeted the Emperor, others with varied motives joined, leading to a forceful suppression by the Empire's entire military might.

Yuder reflected anew on this event, one of the charges for his execution.

His involvement in the Red Field Riot was highlighted not for any other reason but because his Cavalry showed remarkable efficiency in the aftermath, unlike other groups. They eschewed unnecessary torture, using Awakeners adept at information gathering to determine the severity of crimes. Those found innocent or unwittingly involved were even released. Yuder's political opponents accused him of colluding with the rioters, trusting in the 'power of ability' to justify their release.

Of course, this was nothing but baseless slander, known even to the accusers. Although the controversy subsided with the Katchian Emperor's support for Yuder, this event remained a line in his long list of alleged crimes.

"Anyway... the suppression was effective. People never dared to oppose the Emperor again and became completely silent."

As disasters worsened, people prioritized survival over expressing dissent, even if it meant groveling to the nobles for safety.

"And after that, Emperor Katchian..."

Following a period of seclusion, he emerged more actively engaged in foreign relations and showcasing his abilities. Especially with the southern tribe that aided in quelling the Red Field Riot, his interactions increased. This was also when he first showed interest in the so-called false sage.

Perhaps it was then that he began to excessively guard against Yuder, his once most trusted subordinate.

Consequently, Yuder naturally found himself spending more time away from the Cavalry, exploring other areas. If not for this shift, his interest in the recurring disasters might have been delayed. Though seemingly unchanged, much had indeed transformed because of this event.

"Ah... I see, I understand now," Kishiar nodded after hearing everything.

"If the main trouble areas are the west and south, the west shouldn't be a concern anymore, leaving the south as the key focus. You've been particularly interested in the southern merchants and illegal fighting rings, was that the reason?"

"Yes... Well, something like that."

As Yuder responded, he pondered anew on the dubious identities of the southern merchants.

In his previous life, his focus had been on disaster preparedness and maintaining the Cavalry, paying little heed to foreign diplomacy or politics. This was due to widespread wariness of his interest in such matters and the Emperor's preference for Yuder not to exceed his assigned duties.

However, upon reflection, the southern tribes had opportunistically gained from the Red Field Riot, making one wonder if their involvement was without ulterior motives.

Though the answer remained elusive, Yuder felt it was unlikely to be so straightforward.

Kishiar's lips curved up gently.

"Do not worry. Like in the west, it will go well this time too. The name 'Red Field' will not arise again."

Yuder remained silent, reflecting on the origin of that name: the last battlefield, drenched in blood and red thorny bushes, had turned entirely crimson.

That field, since losing its original name, became known only as the 'Red Field,' a place too dangerous for anyone to tread.

Even without mentioning these details, Kishiar always seemed to touch upon the deepest, unspoken parts of Yuder's psyche. His words calmed the turbulent emotions in Yuder's heart, bringing a sense of profound peace.

'Yes. With you here, it will be different this time.'

Yuder nodded almost imperceptibly. Kishiar moved closer, smiling, and Yuder accepted the embrace without resistance.

The contact, their first since the end of the heat period, felt different, natural yet more intense. It evoked in Yuder an indescribable longing, alongside the confirmation that his mating season had indeed ended.

Despite Kishiar's presence and closeness, Yuder yearned for more, a thirst unsatisfied by mere sight.

Kishiar's red eyes seemed to share the sentiment.

"The journey to the village bearing traces of the First Duke of Tain, our next destination, will take another day at this pace. Are you not tired?"

"No, I'm fine. But what about you, Commander?"

"I'm perfectly well... but I'm pleased you're concerned."

Kishiar leaned against Yuder's shoulder, nuzzling affectionately, resembling Nipollen, the cat usually curled up on the Cavalry headquarters' staircase.

'He may be much larger than a cat...'

Amused by the thought, Yuder's eyes softened. As he ran his fingers through Kishiar's golden hair, Kishiar adjusted to make it easier for Yuder to stroke him.

Though such behavior was unbecoming of a Duke of imperial lineage, Yuder said nothing, letting his fingers glide through the soft locks. The lingering heat from the past few days seemed to recede slowly from deep within him.

They remained seated together until just before Nathan Zuckerman's return.

"Nahan, what will we do now?"

In the seventh wall district of the capital, the poorest and most dangerous quarter, Nahan and several Awakeners gathered. Each of their faces bore an expression of unease.

"If the sage had indeed decided to assist the Cavalry, then the actions you and your brothers have taken up to now become unforgivable. We can't return to our base, nor can we remain here."

They had seen the public notices plastered throughout the capital. The shock was mutual the moment they saw 'The Star of Nagran' agreeing to aid in the investigation to find those interfering with the recruitment of new members for the Cavalry.

Just as the sage's side thought the name referred to Nahan, those Awakeners who followed Nahan also believed the Sage had joined forces with the Cavalry. Although they had come this far more out of allegiance to Nahan, the young awakeners were in a state of considerable confusion, not anticipating such a turn of events.

"I saw Nezo patrolling in the sixth wall district yesterday. He's definitely searching for us. What should we do? Should we make a move?"

Originally, they planned to immediately capture the sage's awakeners upon their appearance. However, since ascending to the capital, Nahan's condition had fluctuated between improvement and deterioration. Given the current circumstances, they felt it too risky to act rashly and remained indecisive.

They gazed anxiously at Nahan, who was half-reclining, his body and one arm wrapped in bandages, eyes closed. Ever since returning alive from the west, Nahan's condition had been precarious. Today, it seemed to be at its worst. It was inevitable, given the lack of proper treatment for his ailments and his stubborn nature.

Though he moved with his usual ease when he decided to act, one couldn't help but wonder how long it would last. What would become of them if he suddenly died? Amidst these growing anxieties, Nahan finally opened his eyes.

His face, marred by burns, scanned the eyes of his comrades looking at him.

"Well... it's uncertain if this is truly the sage's doing."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about why they are searching for us so desperately."

"..."

Some understood the implication of his words, others did not. But all felt a common certainty of their dire situation.

"Anyway, it seems they have emerged as we waited. We must meet them."

"Should we really meet them now? Wouldn't it be better to wait and understand the situation more clearly? Or at least verify if Hosanna and others are with the Cavalry..."

"No. That's unnecessary. I have no intention of delaying any longer."

Nahan rose to his full height, gazing down at the bandage soaked with blackened blood. His cold eyes declared,

"We have done enough verification. Now it's time to meet the sage in person. Lead me to where Nezo was sighted."

Chapter 636

Their second destination was Tyckenspail, a nondescript region located between the west and south. Previously unknown to Yuder, it was a small village that had remained obscure until now. Its only notable feature was a few ancient ruins. However, these are only ruins in name, as they have been long neglected and left in a state of disrepair."

According to Kishiar, this very place was where the first Duke of Tain had sent all his research.

"It's rare for anyone other than scholars to venture here to see the ruins... Quite unusual indeed."

An elderly man, who had provided lodging for the three mercenaries, shook his head in wonder yet smiled. He was in a particularly good mood, thanks to the several silver coins the trio had handed him.

"If there's anything you wish to ask, feel free. My granddaughter knows the area well. She can guide or assist you in any way."

"Very well," replied Kishiar, his face altered, with a light smile.

The old man soon left to prepare their meal.

"Now... let's open the letter," Kishiar suggested, waiting until the old man's footsteps faded. With a relaxed smile, he pulled a small bundle of folded paper from his pocket. It was a letter that had arrived just before they entered the village, sent by the Cavalry.

"Four for me, and the last one... for the assistant."

Yuder unfolded the small note handed to him by Kishiar.

'Sent by Gakane, I see.'

The letter, written in the Cavalry's cipher, showed a proficiency far surpassing his previous efforts. Although Gakane had always been adept at writing, his use of ciphers had been awkward; this was a shining result of his efforts.

Yuder quickly read through the content, appreciating it for a moment.

'Hmm... after the Cavalry's public announcement, the Awakeners suspected to be Nahan's associates, frequently seen in the fifth wall district, disappeared, then reappeared in the seventh wall district. The Awakeners associated with the sage began to roam near the lodging where the sage stayed... As expected. Hinn and Finn, who were monitoring Baron Renbow, reported that he ceased frequent contact with the mercenary office... This too, is a continuation of the above matter.'

Most of the content was as he had anticipated. The cleverly worded public message from the Cavalry, about collaborating with non-member Awakeners, was showing swift effects. The insertion of the Star of Nagran was working rapidly.

By now, both the sage and Nahan's sides would be racking their brains in suspicion of each other.

'This is somewhat exciting. Under the guise of Star of Nagan, I wonder when they will realize who truly collaborated with us.'

The 'Star of Nagan', mentioned in the Cavalry's correspondence as their collaborators, were neither the sage's nor Nahan's associates. They were the Awakeners from various places who hadn't completely detached themselves from Star of Nagan and were aiding the Cavalry.

Star of Nagan wasn't a group with clear entry and exit. Gayle and Doyle in the capital, Robel and Marty in the west aiding the mentally affected victims of Nahan, and the previous western base's Awakeners interested in joining the Cavalry—all were still members of Star of Nagan as well as collaborators.

And then there were Ershi and her colleagues, and Hosanna. Ershi, on her own accord, provided useful information to Yuder, who had given medicine to a comrade. Even Hosanna, maintaining his loyalty to Nahan, couldn't remain indifferent before the human kindness offered by Kanna.

If either the sage or Nahan had given more significance to the existence of those Awakeners, or if anyone had grasped the situation and strived to gather them, things would not have turned out as they did. However, they acted exactly as Yuder and Kishiar had predicted.

The sage, despite knowing about his captured colleagues, had neglected them all this while. In Yuder's view, the sage's sense of comradeship was even poorer than Nahan's, who had at least ventured as far as the Cavalry's entrance.

Realistically, the captured could very well have assisted the Cavalry, yet the sage, considering Nahan a greater enemy, fell right into this minor stratagem, dismissing the others as insignificant.

'This also proves the sage's inward vigilance toward Nahan.'

Yuder felt a sense of pride in his intelligence agents, who had continued to perform well in his absence. His recent efforts in training them had been worthwhile.

'But... there's an odd bit of news at the end. Kiolle coming and talking nonsense?'

The section written by Gakane went as follows:

'I hesitated whether to write this, but I'll just send it. A few days ago, Kiolle Da Diarca suddenly came looking for trouble. He sought you, and we met him, but his intentions were unclear. Eventually, Kanna used her abilities to discern that he wanted to know how to contact you. We'll respond as soon as you reply.'

A contact request. Given Kiolle had gone to the trouble of seeking him out, it seemed likely that his true aim was to convey information related to the sage's side or his father that he had picked up somewhere.

'It's probably 99% related to this affair, so nothing new. But he does bring useful information occasionally... Can't be helped.'

Yuder, with chilling accuracy even in Kiolle's absence, decided to briefly write in his reply that there was no need to worry about what Kiolle Da Diarca would do. If Kiolle sent a letter to his side and asked Kanna to pass it, she would handle it accordingly.

Lastly, Gakane's letter ended with a postscript, 'Please tell Sir Zuckerman that I am diligently completing all my training tasks.' Looking up, Yuder saw Kishiar, who had finished reading his four letters, smiling broadly at him.

"Any interesting news?"

"Nothing particularly amusing in the intelligence reports. Everything seems to be proceeding without notable issues."

"The reports I received from each branch said much the same."

"Ah, Gakane asked me to tell Sir Zuckerman that he's doing well with his training tasks."

Nathan Zuckerman, who had been sitting quietly, slightly raised his cold eyebrows.

"I thought I said there was no need to report that... Understood."

"Maybe he's worried you'll stop teaching him. In such cases, isn't it better to just praise him, Nathan?" Kishiar added with a smile. Nathan Zuckerman pondered for a moment before shaking his head.

"It seems he gets more anxious if I tell him he's doing well. If I have to convey something, it might be better to inform him of the next training task."

Yuder was slightly surprised. He had guessed that Nathan Zuckerman held a high regard for Gakane's character, but he hadn't realized the depth to which Nathan understood people.

'Indeed. Considering he learned from Kishiar and became a swordmaster, he wouldn't teach half-heartedly...'

Teaching inherently involves understanding each other.

One cannot teach anything without knowing something about the other person.

Yuder thought that with a mentor so dedicated to understanding his pupils, even amidst his busy schedule, Gakane would be able to focus more comfortably on his training. As Gakane's colleague and friend, Yuder felt a great sense of satisfaction.

Consequently, the reply to Gakane contained a longer list of the next training tasks relayed by Nathan Zuckerman than Yuder's original message. Yuder also added a special training menu designed specifically for Gakane, who was handling two training regimes simultaneously.

Had Gakane known this from afar, he might have shed tears of mixed emotion, whether they be of joy or sorrow.

After sending all the replies, Kishiar and the others stepped outside.

"We know the name of the ruins where the first Duke of Tain is said to have buried his research materials, but not the exact location. We'll need a guide."

Fortunately, they had the granddaughter of the elderly man at whose house they were staying. The girl, who introduced herself as Anne, agreed cheerfully to guide them to the local ruins.

"My grandfather said to answer any questions you have. I'm curious why you'd want to visit such unremarkable places... but since you said you're mercenaries, I won't ask."

Their guided tour revealed three ruins in the vicinity of the village. Each was a remnant of a building presumed to have been constructed about a thousand years ago, but their original purposes were difficult to discern.

After inspecting all the buildings, Kishiar pointed to one.

"Here. This place is the most likely candidate."

Chapter 637

After inspecting all the buildings, Kishiar pointed to one.

"Here. This place is the most likely candidate."

The spot Kishiar indicated was the last of the three ruins they had seen. Yuder looked at the teetering pile of stones in the indicated direction and nodded slightly.

"I also thought this one had the highest possibility."

"Did you? How so?"

Kishiar's interest was piqued. He seemed curious if Yuder knew something from a previous life's memories.

However, Yuder's reason for choosing the third ruin had nothing to do with that. He slightly removed his hood, revealing his face only to Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman.

The expressions of the two men subtly changed upon seeing one of his eyes turned a faint golden hue.

"With this eye, I can see the flow of magic power. Since entering the first ruin, I've maintained this state. I felt nothing unusual until the second, but at the third, I noticed a slight difference from before."

What they sought were the corpses and by-products of monsters studied by the First Duke Tain. Essentially, they were after his research materials.

But why hadn't he destroyed these by-products of his research and sent them to this remote place instead? Yuder wasn't a scholar, but he knew well how much scholars and mages cherished their research materials.

There were only two possible reasons for sending them here: either the materials and data from the research were too dangerous to dispose of carelessly, or they were sent to be stored out of sight.

Either way, it was highly likely they were not sent for mere disposal.

Kishiar might have thought the same, but Yuder had his own way of finding traces. That was the Eye of Magic.

'The First Duke Tain was a mage. He managed to hide a laboratory on the fourth floor of the underground dungeon for a thousand years without being discovered. Wouldn't he be able to hide other things as well?'

The Eye of Magic was said to brighten vision even in darkness and sensitively catch the flow of magic invisible to normal eyes. Though Yuder had little experience in controlling the eye of his own will, he could hardly feel the effect of seeing the flow of magic power, this time its power was absolutely necessary.

Thus, just before entering the first ruin, he had continuously used the power of wind very faintly. His eyes naturally brightened when he used his strength, so he thought he would be able to see anything strange.

And it seemed to have worked. As they approached the third ruin, he began to faintly see something different. Around the scattered, broken piles of stones, a faint mist swirled.

At first glance, it was a subtle aura that didn't feel strange, but upon closer inspection, Yuder felt an abnormal flow of wind brushing against his clothes and skin.

It was a detail that anyone other than Yuder, who could wield the power of wind, would have missed otherwise.

"Like water, wind has its flow. It's not unusual for it to get disrupted or collide, but on a day like today when the wind isn't strong, it shouldn't happen. That's why, among the three ruins, I thought this place was the most suspicious."

"I see. Are you feeling any discomfort?"

"I'm fine."

After hearing the answer, Kishiar stared at Yuder for a moment, as if trying to discern the truth, then smiled, apparently convinced of Yuder's sincerity.

"Indeed... You thought the same as me, but used a different method. I inspected all three ruin sites to see if what I was looking for was among them. It turned out to be here, at the third one."

"What is it?"

"Just this."

Kishiar nudged a pile of stones from the third ruin with his foot, lying nearby. The surface bore marks as if scratched by a knife, but weathered by wind and rain over many years, its true identity was indecipherable.

"It's a script often used from ancient times up to the founding era. It signifies a communal graveyard."

'A communal graveyard?'

"Though much eroded and broken, the pattern of eight herringbone marks is still discernible enough to count. So, it's certain."

After saying this, Kishiar briefly explained the architectural style of communal graveyards used in ancient times.

"Graveyards from the old times all shared a common trait: they dug deep into the ground to create underground caves and built walls with stones. Though they also constructed stone entrances and small buildings above ground, they didn't place bodies there. So, for handling large amounts of remains like a monster's corpse or by-products, such a place would be ideal, wouldn't it?"

His logic seemed sound. Kishiar called over Anne, a guide who had been waiting nearby alone.

"Do you know anything about this third ruin? Even an old tale would do."

"Hmm..."

After pondering for a moment, Anne spoke up.

"Neighbor Mary's grandmother told me once. In her grandmother's time, a lord dug up the land here and found so many skeletons that they just reburied them. The adults said this place must have been a graveyard, but I'm not sure. The land isn't good for farming because of the many stones, so it's just been left as is."

Kishiar glanced over and winked, as if to say, 'See, I was right.' As Yuder casually ignored his unnecessarily flamboyant face, Nathan Zuckerman handed a coin to Anne.

"We need to examine this place more, so you can go back first."

"Oh, but my grandfather told me to guide you till the end..."

"It's fine. Just tell him we asked you to leave early."

Yuder learned something new about Nathan Zuckerman: despite his gruff voice, he was quite good with children. The child, seeming to have a sense of responsibility, hesitated but eventually stepped back, accepting that not disturbing the guests was part of her duty.

"I'll come back if you're not back by night!"

After the child left, Kishiar patted his adjutant's shoulder in approval.

"Well done, Nathan. Now, let's take a closer look."

Kishiar was well-versed in how ancient communal graveyards were built and where their entrances were typically located. Just by circling the site a few times, he easily deduced what the original structure must have looked like and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"There are more rocks buried near the presumed entrance than I thought. Perhaps using my power to gather them and reconstruct the old structure might be the best way to clear a path down."

"I can assist with the power of earth."

"No, it's fine. Most of it isn't buried but scattered on the surface, and this is no different from a puzzle. It'd be better if I do it with my power alone."

After responding, Kishiar turned his head towards Nathan Zuckerman.

"There's no need to worry about me using too much power, Nathan."

"I haven't yet expressed any concern."

"It's obvious."

The man chuckled lightly through his nose and stepped forward.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly raised his hand towards the scattered piles of stones.

Yuder suddenly felt the air around them grow heavy.

The flow of power emanating from Kishiar was immense, unbelievably stemming from just one person. It spread out in concentric circles around the entire ruins. Considering how usually Kishiar's use of his Awakener's power was barely noticeable, the current magnitude of his power was astonishing.

Then, in the next moment, the stones scattered around them began to levitate with a heavy rumbling vibration. Resisting the pull of the earth that sought to drag them back down, the stones shook off their inertia and rose, creating an overwhelming sensation.

Kishiar, after surveying all the stones, gracefully lifted his hand a bit higher. The stones then started to move and converge towards a specific point.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The rocks and stones smoothly glided into place. Each time a stone touched the ground, the earth vibrated slightly under their weight.

Large stones forming the foundation were laid first, followed by smaller ones. Despite their weathered condition, they fit together like a puzzle, forming the shape of a specific building as if reversing time. It was a magnificent spectacle.

As the number of stones that needed to be moved decreased, Kishiar's power became more skillfully controlled. What initially felt like a palpable pressure on the skin became so gentle towards the end of the construction that it was almost imperceptible.

Considering this might be his first time exerting power on such a large scale, the result was unbelievable.

'To move so many large stones without a single one out of place, and to do it perfectly on the first try... The members struggling with power control training would have cried if they saw this.'

Immense power. A mind that could calculate numerous possibilities in an instant to produce the desired outcome in real time. And perfect control to back it up.

Yuder thought, even with his vast experience, if he were asked to replicate the feat, he could do it, but the Yuder of the past would have probably made a few mistakes due to an overflow of power on his first attempt.

In this regard, Yuder was once again struck by the monstrous ability of the man before him.

Yet, it was not something to fear or dread.

Rather, his gaze was captivated by the flow of power sufficient to rival his own.

Maybe this was what it felt like to be fascinated by something, a feeling he hadn't quite experienced before.

"Now, the building that was at the entrance has been reconstructed. Shall we go inside? The entrance should be somewhere in there."

With a smile, Kishiar turned his head. They entered the rustic entrance of the building without hesitation.

Chapter 638

Rewinding through ages, the interior of the ancient cemetery, once again revealed, was shrouded in darkness and lay desolate. The structure that Kishiar had erected was but a mere skeleton, a superficial framework, a fact that seemed all too obvious.

"If it's built according to ancient architectural styles, the real entrance leading to the chamber of corpses should be in the innermost part of the building. So... it must be around here."

Kishiar strode forward confidently, halting at a particular spot. The ground under his gaze was in disarray, with stones uprooted and scattered about. It appeared impossible for mere human effort to find a way down, yet none present felt a hint of despair.

Why worry when Yuder Aile, who could manipulate the earth as his limbs, was there?

"I'll take it from here."

Yuder directed his power towards the spot Kishiar had indicated. To others, it might have seemed like he merely flicked an eyebrow, but in that fleeting moment, Yuder had the entire surrounding terrain in his grasp.

Concentrating his immense strength, he cast his eyes downward, and the conditions beneath the earth's surface became as clear to him as if he were observing them firsthand.

'The reason this land seemed rocky is due to a tunnel constructed with stone walls beneath. But now, it's blocked by the soil that has accumulated over time, making it inaccessible.'

The solution then was simple: avoid the stone framework and shift the filling soil to reveal a passageway leading down to the cave. Moving the earth was not a difficult task.

Having reached his decision, Yuder instructed only Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman to step back. As he drew a deep breath and exerted his power again, a rumbling vibration began to emanate from below.

'This might be felt by the villagers nearby, but they won't think it's an earthquake.'

"If there's any trouble, I'll be ready to assist," Nathan Zuckerman said, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword. Kishiar stood close by, arms crossed, his trust implicit in his gaze. That look simultaneously stirred Yuder's senses as an Awakener and his human emotions.

It's a familiar task, yet the presence of an observer made everything feel different. He wanted to exert his power flawlessly, without the slightest error.

Perhaps Kishiar had entertained a similar thought just moments ago.

"Don't worry. This will be over shortly."

And Yuder did just that.

Moments later, the ground heaved and churned like a swamp, spewing a massive mound of earth, opening up like a gaping maw before them. Concurrently, the air currents, more violent than before, became distinctly visible to Yuder's heightened perception.

'It's done.'

At last, the entrance to an ancient burial site, long concealed, was revealed before them. It was a sight different yet equally magnificent compared to when Kishiar had erected the building.

Kishiar approached Yuder to examine the newly unveiled entrance.

"Perfect. Well found."

"From what I see, the energy flow is stronger than before, indicating we've found the right place."

"Shall we descend then?"

They stepped towards the real entrance to the underground burial chambers. As they walked between the cleared earth and stone walls, a cold, damp chill crept up their necks. The deeper they went, the darker it became, prompting Yuder to summon fire to illuminate their surroundings.

'This place is remarkably well-preserved for its age. It looks more like an emergency underground passage than a path to a tomb.'

The path was narrow but with a ceiling considerably high. Nathan Zuckerman could walk without almost stooping. For Kishiar, however, the ceiling was still too low, forcing him to walk with his head bowed.

Nathan Zuckerman seemed slightly concerned about his lord walking hunched over, but Yuder's worry was of a different nature. The breath of the man following right behind him felt too close than before.

"..."

It was absurd that his full attention and senses were drawn to something entirely unrelated while he was working. Thankfully, it appeared he wasn't the only one feeling this way, as he could sense eyes fixed on the back of his neck without even looking back.

In the past, such a sensation wouldn't have been elicited in a formal situation. But now, the clear gaze he felt, even when he realized it, didn't waver, indicating its awareness.

This subtle yet honest change, though not significant, was profoundly pleasing to Yuder.

As Yuder pondered whether to glance back or not, a low voice reached his ears.

"...Before leaving Tainu, Baron Koelt mentioned something about the research of the first Duke of Tain. He wasn't a mage, but a scholar deeply versed in lore and history. He meticulously scrutinized the historical context of that time to understand the First Duke's peculiar research aims and subsequent actions."

Baron Koelt was just as earnest as Kishiar had felt when he first saw him. Despite being overwhelmed with reviving Tainu from the ruinous exploitation of the Willhem family, he hadn't forgotten to examine the First Duke of Tain's research.

He scoured all available documents to understand the early situations of the West and the Empire, even utilizing his distant blood relation to the Tain family to access private archives passed down in old Western noble houses.

In a few rare records left by the Duke's retainers, Koelt sensed something.

"The First Duke of Tain kept his research secret, even from his closest retainers. They thought the Duke was more interested in something other than magic or monsters. Do you know what that was?"

"No."

"History."

The voice softly uttered the word.

"The First Duke of Tain had a profound interest in the history before the Great Destruction. Much of it has been lost over time, but this deep interest apparently caused considerable concern among his contemporaries."

Back then, people were too preoccupied with surviving the future to look back at a crumbling past. Those who delved into the past were often seen as dangerous eccentrics.

Yet, the First Duke of Tain remained deeply interested in the pre-Destruction past. This wasn't always the case. Baron Koelt cautiously suggested that the Duke's deep interest in 'lost history' began around the time of the First Emperor's demise.

"According to the Duke's journal, his intense research on monsters also started after the Emperor's death. It seems logical to assume a connection between the two."

The Great Destruction, monsters, and the shattered, unknowable histories.

Koelt's conclusion from piecing all these together was as follows.

"It's possible that the First Emperor's passing had something to do with those matters. That's what was said"

Silence followed, hanging in the air like a mist.

"Of course, he hadn't interpreted the First Duke of Tain's journal as thoroughly as we have. His conclusion wasn't based on complete information. Still, considering this, I think it's a fairly reasonable conjecture. Remember the journal's final entry?"

Yuder cast his mind back swiftly to the last sentence of the translated version Kishiar had given him.

"After my father's death, the only one who held the same questions was my Spiritual father. What did he gain? Where is he now after leaving Gyllandr Hill with the scripture... That's the part I'm referring to."

"Yes, I remember," Yuder replied.

"If we take that sentence at face value, after the death of the First Emperor—who was the First Duke of Tain's father—both the Archmage Luma and the First Duke, Blake Van Tain, began to do things they had never done before. After the Emperor's death, Luma left the Empire years later, and the First Duke started fervently researching lost history and monsters. Even Luma showed interest in his studies at one point."

One death. And the altered course of others' lives thereafter.

"The First Emperor's death certainly left them with profound questions, sparking something new. Whether the cause was as Baron Koelt suggested—the cause of death—or something else, remains unclear. But it's a possibility worth considering."

A long silence ensued. As Yuder descended the stairs, he pondered the tale Kishiar had shared.

'The cause of the First Emperor's death...'

The known cause of the First Emperor's demise was simple: he had departed this world early after establishing Orr, following the prevention of the Great Destruction—a legend of sorts.

His death was overshadowed by his magnificent achievements. More renowned were the tales of the Empress who led Orr alone after him and the Crown Prince who ascended to the throne as the Second Emperor under her guidance.

Thinking of the First Emperor, Yuder's mind naturally drifted to the story Enon had told him. He was the one who had seen the 'real' final page of the First Duke of Tain's research journal, which Kishiar hadn't seen.

Yuder had yet to properly share this with Kishiar due to an incomplete translation and subsequent busyness.

"Actually, I have something I'd like to share with you. Do you remember when I said there was something I'd tell you about once I was certain, after reading your translation?"

"Of course."

Yuder thought of Nathan Zuckerman behind him. He hesitated, wondering if he should speak in his presence, but Kishiar swiftly whispered a solution.

"If necessary, I can create a barrier with magic so that no one but me can hear."

"That would be fine. Either way is okay with me."

Nathan Zuckerman agreed. After a moment of consideration, Yuder nodded.

It might not be directly related to him, but since it was connected to his own experiences, he wanted to proceed with caution.

"Understood. I can create such a barrier myself, so let me use my power for a moment."

The power of the wind rose sharply, subtly altering the flow of air in its wake. Though it was uncertain if this would be entirely effective against a swordmaster, as long as the other party was not keen on listening, it would suffice.

Yuder steadied his breath and began to speak.

"Enon had unearthed hidden information within the journal. While I don't yet know the exact original text, I have heard some key details. According to him, the Founding Emperor might have been... in a situation similar to mine."

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Kishiar was not unaware of what being in a similar situation to Yuder meant. As his gaze rapidly shifted, Yuder continued to speak.

"Frankly, I was surprised only because the subject was His Majesty the First Emperor. Enon had been speculating for some time that there might have been someone like me in the past. If the hidden content in the journal is true, then that speculation is finally proven."

"If he has always thought so, was there some basis for this speculation?"

Yuder hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should reveal more, but his deliberation was brief.

He already knew from Enon himself that Enon was no ordinary human. To explain the situation, he felt the need to preemptively establish Enon's extensive knowledge about the Archmage Luma.

"Enon knows things about the Archmage Luma that others do not. According to him, Luma was secretly conducting some research before leaving the Empire."

"Just like the First Duke Tain, his disciple."

"Yes."

Kishiar did not ask why Enon knew so much about Luma. He was only interested in the core of Yuder's statement.

"What exactly was the research about? Was it on a similar theme to the Duke's?"

"No, what he studied was..."

Yuder murmured, gazing into the darkness unfolding before them.

"...a method to reverse time."

It was an unprecedented feat, yet one that Yuder Aile had personally experienced.

Yuder recalled the words Enon had spoken after discovering his secret.

The Archmage Luma had long secretly studied magic to reverse time. Despite being a formidable mage who created beings like Enon, he failed to achieve results and eventually left the Empire.

Enon speculated that Luma might have started this bizarre research after encountering someone like Yuder who had traveled back in time. Finally, in the hidden last pages of the First Duke Tain's research journal, he found something to support this theory.

'If everything written here is based on fact, then the subject might have been the First Emperor of this nation.'

He couldn't be sure, but the important thing seemed to be that both the First Duke Tain and Luma believed it.

The legendary Archmage and his disciple, a Duke descended from the First Emperor, were intelligent and remarkable enough to believe such a tale. What could have happened to make them believe in such a story?

The time when both began their strange, secretive research coincided with the demise of the First Emperor. One sought to control the flow of time, researching the origins of monsters, while the other endeavored to create magic that could directly reverse time.

Though their approaches differed, both were linked by their research on time.

Could it be that the First Emperor of the empire, like Yuder, was someone who had returned by reversing time?

"To sum up... both the Archmage Luma and the First Duke Tain conducted secret research related to time, possibly because of the First Emperor who founded this Empire. If he was indeed a being like you, then surprisingly, everything makes sense."

"Yes."

Kishiar, not smiling as usual, seemed to weigh his thoughts in a long silence, indicating he did not take the situation lightly.

As time passed, he finally spoke again.

"Though you might already know, records from that era are scarce," began Kishiar, with a hint of bitterness. "It was believed right to destroy the belongings of the deceased, and due to the limitations of technology, even proper paper was scarce. This led to the priests rigorously memorizing the scriptures of the Sun God to prevent loss, combining oral tradition with the little documentation that survived."

Most of the records that remained were reconstructions by later generations, mixing oral tales with scant historical evidence. Kishiar let out a brief, sardonic laugh.

"Even the artifacts from that time stored in the imperial palace are sometimes doubted for their authenticity, so no further explanation is necessary, I believe."

Yuder remained silent, contemplating.

"However, recently, quite coincidentally, I had the chance to delve into the few records of that era."

Following a dream about Yuder's death, Kishiar had borrowed numerous forbidden texts. Among them were diaries and records written by the Empress and court ladies during the time of the First Emperor.

'But there probably was nothing about the cause of the First Emperor's death or about reversing time. Otherwise, it would have been known long ago.'

While Yuder pondered this, Kishiar continued softly.

"Back then, I didn't consider looking into matters related to the First Emperor, focusing only on what seemed relevant to me. But I will revisit them once I return. There might be something hidden yet undiscovered."

"Understood," Yuder replied.

"For now, let's start by examining the traces of the First Duke Tain here."

Yuder restored the flow of air he had previously blocked. Nathan Zuckerman, who had been standing deliberately turned away, finally turned his head, his cautiousness to avoid overhearing anything inadvertently speaking of his trustworthiness.

"The conversation is over, Nathan. Let's go."

"Understood."

They continued along the stone-lined tunnel. When they reached the first branching path, they thought they had found what they were looking for. However, at its end, they found only a small chamber, a dead-end cave filled with scattered human bones.

The situation remained similar thereafter. Side paths branched off from the main tunnel, leading to what were clearly ancient bone fragments, half-buried in mounds of dirt, eerily peeking out.

'This must be what the child who guided us earlier was talking about.'

It was easy to imagine how a lord from a bygone era, digging into this land, must have shuddered at such a discovery. It made sense why they would reburied it and never looked back.

But the three present were too seasoned and experienced to be frightened by such things.

"Ancient communal graveyards often follow this ant-hill-like structure," Kishiar explained, with the same bright demeanor he had when guiding through the palace.

"The closer to the entrance, the older the graves, and as the number of the dead increased, deeper tunnels were dug for additional burial chambers. Judging by the scale, this might have originated before the Great Destruction."

"I thought it was more like a shelter," Yuder remarked.

"Indeed, it might have served that purpose too," Kishiar agreed nonchalantly.

A millennium had passed, yet the tunnel retained its formidable structure, prompting Kishiar to muse aloud. "It seems a waste to construct such durable tunnels solely for the purpose of storing corpses. They might have also served as shelters during disasters. In fact, in the communal graveyards from the founding era near the capital, artifacts of people who took refuge from monster invasions have been found."

"I see," Yuder acknowledged.

"By the way, what do you see? Is the flow of magic getting stronger?"

"Well, it's been fairly constant since we entered here."

"A new fork in the path has appeared ahead."

At that moment, Nathan Zuckerman, who had been silently following, brought attention to a new fork in their path. Unlike the previous paths, this one was not a mere offshoot; it was significantly larger.

Yuder calmly observed the two paths. His eyes, shining with a golden hue, sensed a stronger flow to the right.

"It seems to be the right path."

"Yes, the stones forming the wall are less worn on the right than the left, meaning it was excavated more recently."

They proceeded to the right, but what they encountered at the end defied their expectations.

"...It's a dead end."

"What do you see?"

"The same as before."

"Then, there's no reason to be deceived."

Kishiar rotated his wrist, casually scanning the surroundings. A surge of golden magic flowed from his red eyes, signaling his intention to use magic as an Awakener.

Yuder's eyes responded to Kishiar's magic, shining even more intensely.

"This place, unlike the Tainu's underground prison, is not an appropriate location for a protection mechanism that can only be opened by blood relatives. So, our options are quite straightforward. I've studied a bit to avoid the frustration of missing the way like before, even when it's right in front of us."

With a smile, Kishiar began to cast his spell.

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"This place, unlike the Tainu's underground prison, is not an appropriate location for a protection mechanism that can only be opened by blood relatives. So, our options are quite straightforward. I've studied a bit to avoid the frustration of missing the way like before, even when it's right in front of us."

With a smile, Kishiar began to cast his spell.

A dazzlingly bright light burst forth, accompanied by golden magic power emanating from Kishiar's hand, filling the space before them. The light, akin to the wind but distinct, illuminated the area before slowly fading away.

The dead-end they faced was no longer blocked. As if there had never been a wall there, a clear passage opened before them.

"...What exactly did you do?"

"I combined a simple yet effective spell with the ancient and useful artifact, the Mirror of Truth, which even I can use."

Kishiar showed a small, worn mirror he held in his hand.

'It's the magic tool he acquired to investigate the relic sent by Prince Ejain.'

The magic power wrapped around the mirror seemed somewhat diminished compared to when he first received it from Mrs. Justin, but it didn't appear to have lost all its power.

"Bringing useful tools like this is essential when coming to such a place."

The man, adept at concealing his thorough preparedness behind a smile, winked and moved forward.

"I prepared because I thought there was a high probability that there was at least one mechanism like this hidden there. It's fortunate we needed it."

"But you used too much power. Is the vessel... alright?"

Nathan Zuckerman expressed concern.

"If it were before, I'd definitely need to rest for a few days after this. But not now. I can endure much more these days. Haven't you noticed the increasing stability of my vessel?"

"That is... true."

Indeed, Kishiar looked almost unscathed. He was sweating slightly on his forehead but did not seem as drained as he had been after using magic in the underground of the Cavalry Headquarters.

Yuder, having observed Kishiar's increasing frequency of using power, felt strange upon hearing this confirmation. The gap between suspicion and certainty was both close and far. The thought that his visible strength was not only due to skill development but also increased stability of his vessel brought back old memories.

Kishiar La Orr had always yearned to unleash the full extent of his power, striving tirelessly to achieve his goals even in impossible situations. How brilliantly radiant and free he had looked, carving a massive sword mark on the wall with a cracked wooden sword.

His current state was a testament to those efforts.

Nathan Zuckerman, too, seemed to share this sentiment, unable to take his eyes off his lord who stood proudly on the ground.

Knowing the times when Kishiar had been in such a dire state that he contemplated death, Zuckerman could somewhat guess how he felt about this situation.

"Since discovering that the power to stabilize the cracked vessel originated from my own abilities, I've become much stronger. It's all thanks to my assistant. So, don't worry about me anymore, Nathan."

'...Wait. Why is my name coming up here?'

Yuder paused, furrowing his brows.

While tending to Emperor Keilusa, he realized that the power protecting the cracked vessel didn't solely come from 'Awakening' itself, but rather, it required the addition of Kishiar's power. However, this was not due to Yuder's merit.

He was about to speak, but Nathan Zuckerman was quicker to open his mouth.

"I understand. And congratulations on achieving yet another higher realm."

Surprisingly, this knight readily agreed with his lord's nonsensical statement. Consequently, Yuder completely missed the chance to assert that it wasn't thanks to him.

Without expressing unnecessary worry, but rather extending congratulations, he was infinitely similar to his lord in that regard.

Even if Kishiar reassured him that there was no need for concern, someone as diligent as Nathan Zuckerman wouldn't easily set aside his worries. However, after the congratulations, the knight's demeanor became noticeably more relaxed.

But as they advanced along the newly revealed path and reached the largest room so far, the three could no longer engage in conversation.

"...This is."

Kishiar, rubbing his chin and tilting his head, stood beside Yuder, who was frowning and scanning the surroundings with only his eyes.

"If Hellem had been here, she would have really appreciated this intentionally arranged setup."

The vast room was filled with what seemed to be hundreds of monster bones. However, their arrangement was somewhat peculiar. Laid out in orderly fashion, each bone placed as if with specific intent, without touching one another, the scene was somewhat chilling.

Why had the First Duke of Tain left the remains in such a manner after his research was completed?

"Yuder, what does the flow of magic power look like now?"

"Since the wall concealing this place was breached, it's almost disappeared. It seems the magic power I saw originated from that magic."

"So, the place itself wasn't magically altered."

Muttering to himself, Kishiar looked around and then gave an order.

"Since the area is open on all sides, there's no need to stick together. Let's spread out and check for anything unusual. Look for any traces the First Duke of Tain might have left."

"Understood."

The three dispersed, walking among the bones, searching for anything amiss. Yuder, maintaining the brilliance of his Eye of Magic, floated several flames in the air to illuminate the area.

'Up close, it's even more bizarre. To think there was a reason to arrange monster bones like this...'

To the faint-hearted, the sight upon entering could have been overwhelming, enough to cause a fainting spell. However, for Yuder, who was accustomed to slaying monsters and piling up even more corpses, it was merely a slightly unpleasant and strange place, nothing more, nothing less.

As if taking a stroll, Yuder walked around, examining the bones laid out below.

'Some are fairly intact, while others are almost entirely eroded. Were the old monsters softer than the ones appearing now?'

Monster corpses and bones decay very slowly due to their sturdiness, which is why weapons made from monster by-products are so popular.

But the bones here varied greatly in condition. Some were well-preserved enough to still have dried flesh clinging to them, while others were so decayed that only rotten soil and a few fragments suggested that something had once lain there.

If it weren't for their precise, evenly spaced arrangement, reminiscent of pieces in a well-ordered strategy game, it would have been difficult to even guess what had been there.

As he continued to walk, looking down, Yuder suddenly realized something.

‘...There seems to be a pattern between the spots where corpses have almost completely decayed and those where they haven't.’

After the almost unrecognizable, severely decayed corpses, there were invariably bodies of similar size in a more average state. Following the relatively intact corpses were again those barely distinguishable as bodies. It seemed that differences in size were also considered to avoid confusion with the other nearby bodies.

At first, he thought it might be the difference between a corpse that had been studied by the First Duke of Tain and a corpse that had not. But something about that explanation nagged at the back of his mind.

Pondering what it could be, Yuder stopped in front of a corpse that, though heavily decayed, still had a considerable amount of bone left.

‘This is good. It should be easy to distinguish it from the one next to it.’

He alternated his gaze between two corpses of nearly the same size.

Then, after a moment, he furrowed his brows and pressed his lips together tightly.

‘...What is this?’

Careful not to disturb the bones, he knelt down on one knee.

Upon closer inspection, his earlier suspicion became clearer.

‘This isn’t... a monster’s corpse, is it?’

He stood up and started walking around more swiftly than before, searching for the 'overly decayed' corpses with more traces left. After finding a few more, he felt more certain that his theory might be correct.

Here, not only were there monster corpses, but also a considerable mix of other animal remains.

