

Turning 641

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

The scene would have been chilling enough had it been just the monsters' bodies arranged in such a manner, but to include the carcasses of other beasts as well was perplexing. What could the First Duke Tain possibly be thinking or intending with this?

"Could there be a magical formation or something of that sort here?"

Mages could create formations capable of invoking magic power using magic stones and various artifacts. The mages of the Western Mage Union also made large-scale formations, although individually weaker, to protect their strongholds and conduct research.

‘But if it were something like that, it shouldn't be invisible to my eyes...’

Yuder scanned the scattered bodies with a suspicious gaze before shaking his head.

He then resumed his walk around the area, focusing particularly on the traces of the beast carcasses. He hoped to grasp the intent behind this arrangement by identifying the types of beasts.

However, even for him, who had extensive experience observing wildlife in the mountains, it was challenging to deduce everything from a few decayed bone fragments.

‘There are too few traces compared to the monster carcasses.’

Upon closer inspection, he realized that whoever brought these bodies here had used various means for preservation. It would have been impossible for the carcasses of beasts from a millennium ago to remain to this extent without such efforts.

‘It would have been easier if they were bones of monsters or humans.’ Yuder, squinting his eyes, which started to throb slightly, stared intently at the remains of a beast with long horns.

He strained his mind, trying to deduce whether the decaying horn fragments belonged to a deer or a reindeer when his gaze inadvertently drifted to the monster carcasses lying nearby.

‘...Now that I look at it, there are horns on the monster carcasses as well.’

Yuder observed the well-preserved horns on the monster carcass, then turned to look at the adjacent beast carcass.

‘Somewhat... the horns seem strikingly similar in shape.’

Horns are among the parts that preserve well even after death. With a bit of time, he could confirm the astonishing similarity in size and shape of the horns on both carcasses.

Yuder recalled the numerous monsters he had encountered. Monsters typically had no consistent form, with a wide variety of types making a complete catalog an endless task. Yet, he realized, there was a commonality in their bizarre appearances.

‘Sometimes they resemble other animals, insects, or even plants.’

Take, for instance, the giant Pethuamet he had recently defeated, or even the Long-tailed Gumbo named Penpen.

The creature had an appearance that defied all norms, but its disproportionately large mouth was notable. Its long, curled tongue used for snaring prey and the barbed tail resembled the chameleons found in the south.

Of course, its smooth fur was nothing like a chameleon's, and in some aspects, it even reminded him of a giant caterpillar, though only in certain parts.

And what about the winged monsters? The wings commonly seen on monsters usually resembled those of birds or bats. Yuder had never encountered any that flew with wings unlike the typical concept of 'wings'.

Yuder had always thought the similarities were merely coincidental and had never pondered deeply on this point until now.

He looked down at the two sets of horns for a long time, lost in thought.

Could it be that the reason why the First Duke Tain alternated the carcasses of beasts and monsters here was related to this peculiar commonality he sensed? It was still too early for certainty.

Yet, somehow, he felt an intuition stirring within him. A faint sense that his current line of thought was not far from the truth sharply emerged in his mind.

"Now, it seems we have seen enough. Everyone, come this way."

Soon after, Kishiar called them over. He stood by the carcass at the center.

"Shall we share what we've found? Who wants to go first?"

"I will," Yuder said, raising his hand lightly. Kishiar, noticing something in his eyes, smiled intriguedly.

"Alright, speak."

"I haven't found traces of the First Duke Tain. However, I believe I understand some of his intentions. Both of you must have already noticed that there are as many ordinary beast carcasses mixed here as there are monster carcasses."

As Yuder expected, neither Kishiar nor Nathan Zuckerman seemed particularly surprised by this revelation.

"Yes, I've noticed that too," Kishiar acknowledged.

"From my examination, there appears to be at least one physical commonality between the beast and monster carcasses lying side by side. Either the horns are similar, or the position and length of four long fangs. Although decay makes complete verification difficult, I believe most others would be similar as well."

Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman's gazes turned to the surrounding carcasses. Nathan's eyes narrowed slightly.

"I did think there were many carcasses of similar size placed side by side, but horns and fangs... May I take a look myself?"

"Of course. Follow me."

Yuder showed them a few examples that were visually easier to spot commonalities among the ones he had found here. After examining several carcasses, Nathan Zuckerman, standing in front of the horn fragments Yuder first observed, finally nodded in agreement.

"They indeed bear a striking resemblance. I hadn't paid attention to such details before... but this seems like an undeniable commonality."

"The fact that monsters often have unpredictable forms and sometimes bear body parts resembling other flora and fauna in unusual places is well-known to those familiar with hunting them. However, seeing animal and monster carcasses with directly similar features placed side by side like this is a first for me... they seem even more alike than I thought."

Nathan Zuckerman from the Peletta Knights, experienced enough in hunting to create their own monster compendium, slowly nodded his head. His agreement with Yuder's observation and his evident astonishment were clearly discernible in that small gesture.

"I believe," he began, "that these corpses here were deliberately chosen by the First Duke Tain, each bearing body parts strikingly similar to its own. It seems highly probable he wanted to leave behind something he discovered while studying these monsters."

"Rather than wanting to leave it behind... it might be more accurate to say he wanted to show it to someone who would eventually come here. The act of merely leaving research results is quite different from wanting to communicate an intention to someone else."

Kishiar, who had been quietly observing everything, finally spoke. His eyes sparkled with evident delight at Yuder's discovery, and he parted his lips in a smile that seemed too bright for such a grim setting.

"The deliberate placement of beasts and monsters with resembling parts, as Yuder suggests, clearly indicates an intention to emphasize their similarities. Fascinating. Truly an interesting discovery."

His smile was brighter than seemed fitting for such a place. But what did it matter? Brightness was preferable to darkness. As he was caught in that smile, Kishiar smoothly began his praises again.

"It must be because you are well-acquainted with both monsters and beasts that you were able to make such a swift discovery. Someone like me, who only eats what others have caught, would have taken much longer to realize."

"If you say so, what does that make me, who was in charge of hunting for the Duke?"

Nathan Zuckerman protested softly. His tone was serious, but the protest was not heartfelt. It was only today that Yuder realized Nathan could joke like this with Kishiar.

"It's just that I happened to be near such conspicuous corpses, which expedited my discovery. Both of you would have realized it soon enough, so let's end the embarrassing compliments."

"Oh dear. Even giving sincere praise is difficult."

After saying this, Kishiar turned his head towards Nathan Zuckerman.

"So, Nathan, what have you discovered?"

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"So, Nathan, what have you discovered?"

"I have found something over here. I will explain as you follow."

Nathan Zuckerman strode purposefully toward the direction he had been exploring.

"Unlike Baron Aile, I did not think to look for traces on the corpse, so I focused mainly on the walls and the ground of this cave. Even if no magical traces are felt, physical traces could still be present."

"That's right."

Kishiar agreed.

"So, I focused on the places where traces are more likely to be left and found this. Look here."

Yuder stopped walking. Nathan Zuckerman's finger pointed to where the cave's dug-out wall met the ground. At first, it was too dark to see clearly, but when an extra light was summoned, something became visible.

'That is...'

Half-buried in the spot, no bigger than a small coin, was something difficult to identify due to the wear of time, peeking out from the long-decayed and earth-turned dust.

"It might be an object left by the First Duke Tain, or it might not be. But it certainly looks like it has been here for a very long time."

"Your keen eye is remarkable, Nathan. Well done. Shall we take a closer look?"

Praising his subordinate, Kishiar bent down to carefully lift the object. Yuder, ready to unleash his power or draw his sword at any moment, stayed alert.

In the tense atmosphere, Kishiar casually turned the metal fragment this way and that, examining it in the light, then uttered a thoughtful 'Hmm...?'

"Did you find something?"

"Yes. It's badly damaged, but I've seen something like this before. I think I know what it is."

"What is it?"

"A brooch used by mages."

Kishiar dusted off the metal fragment and held it up clearly on his palm.

"In times when mages were rare, ancient mages used to wear brooches to reveal their identity. Nowadays, there's no need for that, but thanks to that tradition, many mages still wear gemstone brooches."

Indeed, mages often wore brooches adorned with gemstones or jewels, supposedly to compensate for their lack of magic power. He hadn't realized there was also a symbolic meaning behind it.

'Thais Yulman did too... and so did many mages from the Western Mage Union. Even the gifts sent to me were in the form of brooches...'

"Then, could this be an object of the First Duke Tain?"

"Surprisingly, no."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Look closely at the pattern on the surface."

Kishiar tapped the brooch's surface with his fingernail tip. A bit of black ash fell away, revealing a faintly engraved pattern.

"Lemon flower pattern. A mage who used this pattern as his symbol existed a thousand years ago. A very famous one. Can you guess who?"

The mention of lemon flowers sparked a memory.

"Could it be, Luma?"

"Correct."

Yuder was right. Recalling the face of Enon, who particularly liked lemons, he exhaled softly.

"But the First Duke Tain was Luma's disciple. A disciple could well have had a brooch bearing his master's symbol."

"That wouldn't have been the case by the standards of that era. Ancient mages never passed such objects to others. However... there were exceptions."

Kishiar paused briefly, gazing at the brooch fragment in his palm.

"When mourning the dead."

As if leaving flowers at a tomb, it is said that ancient mages used to leave their brooches at the graves of their close mage friends.

"It's not officially known, but in reality, a brooch similar to this one is also stored in the imperial treasury. It's said to have been found in front of the Dawn Palace office, where the First Empress often stayed, after her demise and the conclusion of her funeral."

By then, the Archmage Luma had already left the Empire for some time. People whispered that Luma, who was a close friend of the Empress and hadn't appeared at her funeral, might already be dead. However, they were greatly surprised to find the brooch left there after the funeral.

"But since only a bouquet and the brooch were left behind, it was unclear whether Luma himself had placed it there, so it was not made public. The Second Emperor also seemed to think there was no need to widely publicize it."

"I see. So this item might also have been left in the same manner."

"It's hard to believe, but if it were an Archmage of that caliber, wouldn't it be possible? Coming all the way here, where the disciple's hidden research results are, and leaving a trace behind. It's a plausible guess, especially since there's already another precedent."

It was an astonishing possibility. Luma, known to have left the Empire never to return, might have secretly come back.

Even Enon, who seemed to know more about Luma than anyone, had never mentioned such a story. Yuder felt certain this was a fact even Enon might not know.

"Fortunately for us, we have someone who can discern whether this truly is an item left by Luma."

"Yes. I was thinking the same."

With a slight smile, Kishiar tucked the brooch fragment into his pocket.

"We'll need to send this to the headquarters of the Cavalry immediately upon our return."

Thinking of the brooch as possibly left in mourning for a deceased mage, the black clumps of soil surrounding it felt different. Perhaps they were part of a bouquet, like the one reported to have been left in front of the First Empress's office.

"Well, this allows us to conjecture a few new facts."

Kishiar spoke as he walked towards the central area.

"Firstly, this place might be even more important for the research findings of the First Duke Tain than the underground dungeon where the research journal was found. Secondly, after this place was created, someone infiltrated and left a brooch of mourning. Thirdly, that someone is presumed to be Luma."

Laid out like that, it was truly remarkable. It felt like reading a page from an ancient legend.

"Combining all three leads to one conclusion: this place likely had significance enough for Luma to visit. And I have just discovered traces of an ancient 'Sword Formation' right here in this central area."

Kishiar stood in front of the corpse at the very center.

'Sword Formation?'

It was a term Yuder couldn't recall ever hearing, likely related to ancient knowledge. But as Kishiar continued, it indeed seemed to be the case.

"The Sword Formation is a tactical setup from an old strategy game no longer played. To succeed in this formation, a special rule required promoting all ordinary pieces to knight pieces, allowing the multiplied knights to overwhelmingly push against the enemy with their superior strength."

"That sounds almost too overpowering for a tactic."

"Haha. It's indeed overpowered, but it's considered an unrealistic tactic nowadays, hence not used anymore. However, some speculate that strategy games were based on real military strategies, suggesting that such tactics might have been possible in ancient times."

"...So, knight pieces represent masters of the sword. Does that mean, in ancient times, it was easy for ordinary people to become swordmasters?"

Nathan Zuckerman, who had been listening quietly, asked with a slight frown.

"It's uncertain. What I meant to say is that the layout here resembles that of the Sword Formation. When we discovered the fourth-floor research lab in the underground dungeon of Tainu, something was also hidden in a manner related to strategy games. It seems the First Duke Tain was as fond of strategy games as I am."

Kishiar's eyes sparkled. It seemed he found great enjoyment in discovering traces of such ancient strategy games.

"...So, what's the relevance of this formation to our current situation?"

"In any case, if the formation is successful, the greatest advantage is here. At the center, where the piece is placed."

Kishiar looked down at the corpse beneath his feet.

"So, if there is any trace of the First Duke Tain hidden here, it might be right below this."

"Then it should be easy."

Yuder's eye shone brighter, now with a golden hue. Simultaneously, the ground where the corpse lay collapsed, revealing something hidden.

It was a bundle of papers wrapped in black leather.

'Just as Kishiar speculated.'

Yuder snatched it up and carefully unfolded it. The writing inside was in an ancient language that was unrecognizable, yet the paper felt oddly familiar.

'As if torn from somewhere... Could it be a separated page from that journal?'

Touching it, it seemed likely. What content could be so important that it needed to be hidden this way? After confirming the papers were safe, Yuder handed them to Kishiar.

"Good. We'll check it when we return. If we delay any longer, our little guide might think we've disappeared and come looking for us. Let's head back now."

"Yes, understood."

The return journey was much faster than the way in. Once Yuder emerged onto the ground, he immediately closed the entrance to the cemetery, and Kishiar likewise disassembled the structure he had erected.

Now, no one would know what had transpired here.

"What? You're leaving at dawn tomorrow? Didn't you say there was more to see?"

Seeing the three mercenaries announcing their departure upon their return, the inn's elderly owner expressed deep disappointment. He had expected to earn a few more days of lodging fees, and his sadness at their sudden departure was evident.

"Yes, we are departing earlier than expected. However, your granddaughter was an excellent guide, which expedited our work. As a token of our gratitude, we would like to offer an additional fee for her guidance."

"Really? Ha-ha-ha. Anne will be so happy to hear that."

The old man's face lit up with a smile as he accepted a few more silver coins. He then prepared a lavish meal for the three, using the best ingredients he could find.

Naturally, more than half of that meal ended up in Yuder's stomach.

"I have carefully packaged the brooch and sent it by courier hawk. Now, the only thing left is to decipher these papers."

Kishiar unfolded the bundle of papers he had concealed and brought with him, sitting in a chair.

"I'll be translating it on the spot, so the meaning might not be exact... But if you're curious, would you like to listen?"

"Yes."

"I'm not that curious, so I will step outside for a bit. Earlier, I saw the little girl chopping wood in the backyard on behalf of her grandfather."

Nathan Zuckerman rose and silently left the room. Kishiar, watching his departure with a subtly amused smile, waited until the door closed before extending his hand.

"Hmm. When an opportunity presents itself, how can one refuse? Come over here and let's look at this together."

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"Hmm. When an opportunity presents itself, how can one refuse? Come over here and let's look at this together."

'...Opportunity?'

Yuder's gaze shifted to the door through which Nathan Zuckerman had just exited.

'So, he didn't really go to help the kid splitting firewood but left to ensure it was just the two of us?'

If it was between those who trusted each other implicitly, such a move wouldn't be problematic. But whether such a level of personal trust existed between him and Yuder...

'In my previous life, definitely not. And in this life...'

Previously, Yuder had warned Nathan Zuckerman to be wary of him and to protect Kishiar. Nathan found the strange request somewhat amusing, yet he had faithfully followed it until now.

It was understandable that Nathan had shared information and advice with Yuder, citing the need to protect Kishiar. Yuder had often seen Nathan wear a peculiar expression whenever he saw him with Kishiar. Naturally, Yuder believed that Nathan, despite his complicated feelings, would maintain a proper distance.

However... the change in Nathan's inner thoughts might have been deeper and more significant than Yuder anticipated.

In his previous life, Nathan Zuckerman rarely left Kishiar's side, especially after the manifestation incident. His protectiveness had only intensified, always trying to guard Kishiar from a distance whenever Yuder came to report.

For Nathan to leave his post on his own accord, without any official reason or Kishiar's command, was unprecedented.

'Even after witnessing my heat a few days ago, he made this decision? Can it be true?'

Such an event would normally lead Nathan to heighten his guard around Yuder, not lessen it. Yet, it seemed the knight's judgment was contrary to Yuder's expectations.

Mixed feelings swirled within Yuder: a desire to tell Nathan not to let his guard down so easily, and a complex appreciation for Nathan's silent show of trust.

"Why that expression? Are you disappointed that Nathan left?"

At that moment, Kishiar, quick to notice, inquired. Even while smiling, his eyes were scanning every subtle reaction from Yuder.

"No, it's just...it feels unusual for Sir Zuckerman to leave us alone. Of course, I would prefer it if we could interpret the papers more closely together."

Yuder cleared his mind. As he sat down beside Kishiar, a faint scent wafted from him, tickling Yuder's skin in a welcoming gesture before dissipating.

"Think positively. It's rare for someone like Nathan, who seldom shows his heart, to demonstrate his intentions this way. It's a sign of his trust and regard for you."

Of course, it was natural. Warmth and contentment seeped through Kishiar's voice.

Yuder, staring at the indecipherable script, suddenly spoke up.

"Truthfully, I thought he should be more wary of me. While I don't dislike being acknowledged, it does worry me a bit."

"What a world this is."

Kishiar exclaimed with exaggerated surprise, breaking into laughter.

"I've seen you strive for recognition, but to be uneasy about it is something else. Well, my assistant, who has declined the Deputy Commander position several times, is a remarkable person. It's like seeing that resolute side of you again, and it kindles a sense of nostalgia."

"It's not a joke."

"I know."

Kishiar's eyes softened.

"But have you considered that Nathan, knowing you say such things, ultimately had no choice but to trust and leave?"

"What do you mean by that..."

As Yuder slightly furrowed his brow, a finger gently approached, smoothing the crease with a soft press.

"No matter how much one tries to stay alert, if the other shows only perfection, leaving no room for doubt, and then goes a step further to say it's okay to be even more vigilant... In such a case, even I would have to admit defeat."

Yuder wondered if Kishiar already knew about the conversation he had once had with Nathan Zuckerman. It seemed impossible, yet his words were as precise as if he had been there.

"Nathan and you have quite a few similar traits in your personalities. I've always thought that the two of you could become good friends. It seems like you've already started scheming together behind my back, but I mean even better friends than that."

'...'

What's so good about becoming friends? The notion that having a similar temperament to his was hardly a compliment to Nathan Zuckerman, was it?

And why was Kishiar talking about this, smiling as if he was more pleased than anyone else? Did he actually enjoy the fact that Nathan Zuckerman and Yuder had conspired to share information about him?

These unclear thoughts flitted through Yuder's mind, but he remained silent. Yet, the significance of Nathan Zuckerman having left them alone seemed to have almost entirely dissipated.

"Well then, shall we take a closer look now?"

Kishiar carefully placed a bundle of papers between their knees, making sure it was also visible to Yuder.

The papers, fragile as if they could crumble at any moment, transformed in Kishiar's hands. As if possessed with a will of their own, they gently rose, easily shedding the layers of time that had bound them, separating into five distinct sheets.

"First, I'll read through them, and then we'll start interpreting."

With that explanation, Kishiar turned his gaze to the first sheet. Yuder observed as his red eyes calmly and quickly scanned the page.

The man meticulously went through the first, then the second, and the third pages. It took quite some time to flip through and read all five pages, an unbelievable feat considering it was ancient script.

After reviewing the pages, Kishiar looked down as if digesting the content, and then, a while later, his gaze lifted again. He reached into his bag and pulled out a small book. A glance at the cover revealed it was a book on ancient grammar.

"When did you manage to pack that?"

"I brought a thin one, thinking it might be useful. I've never been beaten when it comes to preparedness since childhood. Though I've recently realized that even that preparedness can falter in the face of someone who is truly earnest."

Kishiar joked as he opened the book, placing it next to the ancient paper, comparing and scrutinizing several points. Only after completing this task did he close the book and turn to Yuder.

A deep breath followed a long pause.

"This is really... incredibly significant. Now I understand why someone wanted to tear it apart and keep it separate."

Yuder was ready to listen. He tensed, waiting for the words that would follow from Kishiar's mouth.

"I had only briefly skimmed the document, so it couldn't be said that I had read it in its entirety. However, to summarize, the First Duke Tain, Blake Van Tain, seemed to believe that the section you discovered during your monster research might be the key to the answer he was seeking."

After speaking these complex words, Kishiar pointed his finger towards a certain part of the unfolded paper.

"Some 'cursed beings' had the ears of a rabbit, the wings of a bird, the tail of a dog, and the claws of a mole. Others bore the eyes of a cat and the scales of a fish. 'The Word of God' speaks of these mixed beings as coming from the world of the Black Moon. I long believed this to be a falsehood. Yet, as time passed while I compared and collected similar entities, my thoughts began to change."

Silence followed.

"The cursed monsters sent by the Black Moon. Where did the curse originate? Where did the Word of God begin? What is the Black Moon? When I pondered these questions, I suddenly realized a certain truth."

His words were a string of concepts that defied conventional understanding. Even if mages were known for their lack of piety, they didn't usually stray this far from general reasoning. It was almost as if questioning where the sun rose or why water flowed.

'Perhaps being from the early days of the nation, his common sense differed from ours.'

While Yuder pondered this, Kishiar quietly continued as he turned to the next page.

"I have seen all the processes by which my father's unbelievable achievements were exaggerated into legends. When humans need to comprehend an inconceivable reality with their own strength, or wish to pass down knowledge that should endure for future generations, they create 'legends.' Thinking in this way seemed to reveal the answer."

Kishiar hesitated briefly after saying this.

"Is 'The Word of God' truly the word of a god?"

A chilling silence flowed like the depths of water.

Yuder pondered again over the shocking content of the words he had just heard.

'The Word of God... Is it truly divine?'

The meaning of these divine words was, of course, naturally associated with the scriptures. Yuder, not particularly devout, was aware that the texts written in the Sun God's scriptures were said to be the accounts of prophets who had directly heard the Word of God. This was common knowledge.

However, if the words written on this paper were true, then the First Duke of Tain had denied the very idea that 'the scriptures were the direct word of God.'

If the scriptures were not the word of God, then many miraculous events believed to have been divine interventions would also be denied. What about the divine power exhibited by the priests?

A thought crossed Yuder's mind, a memory of what Kishiar had said before.

'Some mages had argued that the existence of divine power does not prove the existence of a god, hadn't they?'

But this statement was even more shocking and bold than that debate. If someone had found this bundle of papers before them, it would have been burned immediately upon deciphering.

Yuder understood why Kishiar had said, 'I see why it was hidden here.'

"So... the First Duke of Tain believed that the words in the scriptures were all fabricated by humans?"

"That's the gist of it. Despite the Temple of the Sun God being weak at that time, it was undoubtedly a dangerous notion."

Despite saying this, Kishiar, looking down at the paper, did not seem particularly displeased. His demeanor was surprisingly calm, especially for a descendant of the imperial family who should have been most shocked by this story.

"It seems you're not too surprised, Commander."

"Really? I thought I was quite shocked. If I seem unaffected, it's probably because I've had similar thoughts since I was a child."

There was no need to ask what he meant, as the man soon clarified.

"Listen. The founding Emperor of Orr, celebrated for receiving the blood of the Sun God and wielding a divine sword to prevent great destruction and establish the nation, is a famous legend."

"Yes."

"But how can one be certain of inheriting the god's blood when the god has never appeared?"

Yuder was silent for a moment before finally speaking.

"In the temple... isn't there something like holy fire? The incarnation of the god depicted..."

"Officially, it's said that the artists received 'special revelations' when depicting the incarnation of the god. But in reality, all those artists used the imperial family of the time as models. I've often been told I resemble the god's incarnation, likely due to this influence. We don't know what the holy fires were like before the great destruction, as the first depictions in history are from after the establishment of Orr."

"I didn't know that."

"It's natural to be unaware. Who would dare discuss such things?"

After saying this, Kishiar stroked his chin and lifted the corners of his lips.

"Since childhood, I've been curious about this. Every time I went to the Grand Temple, I troubled the Pope by insisting on more solid evidence that I was a descendant of a god. After awakening my divine power, I've spoken with many clerics about it, but none could give me a satisfying answer."

The story of the founder of the Orr imperial family receiving the god's blood is not in the scriptures. Yet, everyone believes it. The belief itself is as good as an answer. Denying an answer that is already evident is meaningless.

The priests had said so, but their words failed to convince young Kishiar.

"To me, both magic and divine powers weren't much different. It wasn't a power awakened due to fervent belief in a deity. There are imperial family members like me who have awakened divine power, but in fact, more royals have not. Then, does that mean they are not descendants of the imperial bloodline blessed by the god's blood? Not necessarily."

Silence followed.

"Do you remember the story I mentioned before? About how mages debated that the presence or absence of divine power couldn't prove the existence of a god."

The very thoughts Yuder had just entertained were now echoed in Kishiar's words.

"I remember."

"They argued that greater piety doesn't necessarily translate into more potent divine power, and that even a priest who commits evil deeds can continue to use that power until death. If there were a god, that shouldn't be possible. Some extremists even claimed that divine power was no different from magic power."

Kishiar laughed, recalling how those who made such bold claims were denounced to the temple and subjected to a religious trial.

"During my curiosity about the divine lineage, I found these debates quite intriguing. In fact, if their arguments hold, even the Divine Sword Orr could be considered just an exceptional magic artifact."

The idea of the Divine Sword Orr as a mere magic tool was more audacious than the ancient mages' claims. Yuder began to consider whether he should block the surrounding area to prevent their conversation from being overheard.

"Undoubtedly, the Divine Sword has a mystique that allows it to express something akin to a self-awareness. But isn't that similar to the animated armor knight in the Deluma Palace? If the knight is moved by magic, then the sword is moved by divine power. They're quite similar, aren't they?"

Yuder was silent for a moment before responding.

"I'm not well-versed in either field, so it's difficult for me to comment, but your words seem reasonable, Commander."

"I'm grateful to have the fortune of conversing with someone who doesn't dismiss what I say as madness simply because I said it."

Kishiar blinked both eyes in quick succession.

"I may have delved into my old stories, but the point that Blake Van Tain was trying to make here is singular. The legendary tales and mystical powers we've long considered profound and grand might, upon closer inspection, not be so different from what we know today."

"Today being..."

"Yes. Like how our world changed completely just two years ago due to a stone that fell from the sky. That's a fitting example."

As Kishiar added this to his previous statements, the message he intended to convey began to crystallize in Yuder's mind.

'The Founding Emperor... legends... scriptures, God... and the Awakeners.'

The First Duke Tain had talked about witnessing his father's deeds being exaggerated into legends. It was an easy concept to grasp for Yuder. Many similar incidents had occurred whenever he displayed his immense power.

Of course, in his case, the tales were often inflated in a terrifying and fearsome direction. Ridiculous rumors had abounded about the secrets behind the extraordinary strength of the Cavalry Commander Yudrain Aile – like deriving power from consuming a child's liver daily or being a demon's offspring.

'Perhaps, if such rumors had gone uncorrected for a few hundred years, people might have come to believe I truly was such a being.'

This led to the contemplation that perhaps the tale of the Founding Emperor inheriting the blood of god was similarly fabricated. Attaching the narrative of being 'someone who, upon closer inspection, inherited divine blood' to a person of great accomplishments, as a form of admiration and understanding, wasn't a difficult task.

All words, after all, were a matter of how they were applied.

'Though it's just a thought, it does feel dangerously plausible.'

The more he considered it, the more dangerously sensible it seemed.

Perhaps future generations would perceive the tale of an Awakener emerging from a stone that suddenly fell from the sky as akin to the legend of a mage born from a magic spring. If Kishiar, often praised as an incarnation of the divine, were to be remembered in history, it wouldn't be strange to attach the epithet of the reincarnation of the Founding Emperor.

But who in that distant future could definitively prove that these added narratives weren't the reality?

'The First Duke Tain, who authored those writings, must have observed such processes and thus speculated that the existence of the scriptures might also be the result of a similar evolution.'

A faint shiver ran through him. Stories that once seemed distant and far off now felt alarmingly close.

"The scriptures record fragments of stories from a very long time ago, well before the Great Destruction. Although they are covered in all sorts of unrealistic metaphors, if one peels away all of that and thinks about it... The existence of Messenger Orhe, who is said to have proved the existence of the Sun God on this land, might not have been so different from that of Luma, the first Archmage who established magic on this land."

Just as mages were persecuted and had to prove their magic when it first appeared, the first priests in the scriptures had a similar experience. The miracles attributed to Orhe were not much different from those performed by the Archmage.

"At the very end of the text, Blake Van Tain wrote this."

Kishiar showed Yuder the last part of the paper.

"Perhaps my spiritual father, who took the scriptures and left this place, had already entertained the same thoughts as I. If I were a bit healthier, I might have traveled south. But now, I cannot..."

Chapter 645

Yuder reflexively thought of the southern part of the Empire when he heard 'south,' but soon realized that the writer might have been referring to a region even farther south.

"By south, do you mean... possibly the area south of the desert?" Yuder pondered.

"I believe it's highly probable. Right after the Great Destruction, the number of survivors across the continent was even fewer than the current population of the Empire's capital. Back then, the concept of countries and borders was different from now, and the current border system was not established until the reign of the Third Emperor."

Thus, the 'south' referred to by the First Duke of Tain, Blake Van Tain, was likely the true southern part of the continent, south of the desert. Kishiar seemed to agree with this assessment.

"That makes sense."

"But why specifically mention the south? That remains a mystery."

Even Kishiar, who was knowledgeable in many fields, couldn't be sure about the implications of this reference.

The final conclusion of one who began researching the origins of monsters to find a way to manipulate time was this mysterious 'south.' What had he hoped to find there?

"Did Luma, who had left the Empire much earlier with the scriptures, also head south?" Yuder wondered.

Prince Ejain had mentioned a blind sage in Nelarn, presumed to be Luma. If it was indeed Luma, how had he become blind and ended up in Nelarn after leaving the Empire? Was Nelarn the end of his journey?

"So, did Luma eventually discover a way to turn back time?" pondered Yuder.

"We should ask Nathan about the south when he returns," Kishiar suggested.

Yuder, deep in thought, lifted his gaze.

"Does he know much about the history of the Southern Lands?"

"More than us, surely. Nathan's original family were 'Masha' in the Southern Lands, protectors of tribes... akin to knights in the Empire," someone explained.

This was new information to Yuder.

Kishiar briefly elaborated with a smile, "Long ago, there was a significant armed conflict between the Empire's south and the Southern Lands. It's now known as the Sand War. Although the Empire emerged victorious, there were several minor clashes with the Southern Lands over the years. Nathan's parents were captured as prisoners of war in a conflict that occurred about a decade ago."

Yuder remembered hearing about the Sand War from Gakane. Even after General Jureli led the Empire to victory, the conflict hadn't completely ceased.

"Nathan was born to those imprisoned parents and was a small boy doing menial work in the southern palace. He never showed fear, a remarkable lad. Had I not been recuperating there from a summer cold, I might never have met him."

Yuder recalled Nathan Zuckerman recounting his meeting with the Second Prince Kishiar, who was then a convalescing child at the southern palace.

The perspectives of their shared story differed, but what mattered was how that meeting changed Nathan Zuckerman's life. From a slave servant to a noble prince's attendant, a friend, and finally a member of Duke Peletta's staff and the knighthood.

The boy, once deemed too small, had grown into a swordmaster of formidable stature, no longer to be casually referred to as 'small.'

"Nathan didn't spend much time with his parents, but he heard quite a bit about life in the Southern Lands and the stories passed down there," Kishiar relayed. "Perhaps there's something in those stories that might resonate with this discussion."

Not long after, Nathan Zuckerman, having finished chopping firewood and repairing a broken door, returned and responded to what he had heard.

"There is something that comes to mind now that I've heard this," Nathan said.

"Really?"

"The people of the south refer to themselves as 'Children of the Moon,' or 'Stars.' According to their legends, long ago, these children were the rulers of the entire world. They were great warriors who wielded sacred swords and bows, slicing through evil and conquering death itself, accompanied by wolves that returned from the dead and owls with the ability to see through darkness. They maintained peace for a long time," Nathan recounted, as if sifting through ancient memories.

"But that peace was shattered by the greed of many, and the warriors could no longer wield their sacred swords and bows. The tale ends with a lesson against greed," he concluded.

"Swords and bows," Kishiar mused, a meaningful glint in his eyes.

"The Empire and nations north of the desert may not favor this tale, but there's a credible theory that the origin of aura-using swordsmanship actually began in the Southern Lands," Kishiar noted.

"Yes, the Southern people believe that. They say that all weapons in the world originated from these sacred swords and bows, a fact known even to their children. I've heard tales of those who could wield aura with bows in the past," Nathan added, though admitting he had never seen it firsthand. Yuder thought of the members of the Cavalry who skillfully used aura-like powers with bows, suggesting these stories weren't entirely baseless.

Kishiar seemed to share this sentiment.

"Look at it this way, these tales resemble the saga of the Archmage Luma, the origin of Messenger Orhe's divine power, and the story of the sacred sword and bow warriors who overcame adversities and revealed mystical powers," Kishiar observed, counting off on his fingers.

"And one more thing. There's a common thread in these stories, related to something that Duke Blake Van Tain was desperately curious about. Do you see what it is?"

Yuder nodded slowly, having noticed another commonality in Nathan Zuckerman's stories.

A dry voice whispered between slowly parting lips, "The returned from death."

"That's right," Kishiar agreed.

"Consider that these three stories represent the origins of magic, divinity, and aura. Each of them involves a figure returned from death. Orhe regenerated torn limbs, escaping death. Luma's case is still unclear, but it seems there was someone similar around him. And the warriors of the sacred sword and bow had a wolf that returned after killing death."

Kishiar lightly shook his four folded fingers, then spoke, "With such a commonality, wouldn't it be a reason enough for Duke Blake Van Tain to have wanted to travel to the south? That's what I'm thinking."

Yuder agreed, and as he did, a complex mix of emotions, indescribable and overwhelming, coursed through him, sending a shiver down his spine.

Magic. Divinity. Aura.

These three powers, and the strength of an Awakener like himself, did not pale in comparison.

Yuder Aile, returned from death.

Could he dismiss as mere coincidence the recurring commonalities between the ancient past and the present, as recounted in scriptures, legends, and old records?

‘It's hard to see it as mere chance,’ Yuder thought to himself.

Suddenly, he felt as if he were cast alone into a vast ocean, unable to see even an inch ahead, confronting something unfathomable.

The reins he believed he was holding, moving forward, might have been connected to something much larger and unknown all along.

Seeking escape from this vague unease, Yuder turned his gaze to Kishiar, who, like him, was lost in deep thought. Without exchanging a single word, Yuder found surprising solace and comfort in Kishiar's presence, his mind settling down.

‘Yes. Nothing has gone wrong so far. If I come to understand more about the past, I might learn why I returned and in which direction I should move forward.’

When he first arrived in this village, he had only expected to find some remnants of the First Duke of Tain. But, as he delved deeper, he discovered that this place held more profound and astonishing information than he had previously known.

‘I haven't found the complete answer yet, but knowing this much is already a significant gain. There's much more to discover moving forward.’

Chapter 646

“The part I had shown was mostly focused on the latter half, but it seemed that there were more detailed opinions about monsters resembling animals in the front section.”

"I'll take a closer look at that when we arrive at the southern branch." After the conversation had ended, Kishiar stated this. The bundle of papers, written by the First Duke of Tain, was rolled up in leather and tucked away in the Commander's luggage, safe from any intrusion.

The three spent the night and, as dawn broke, they hastily departed the small village, setting their course southward. Their journey was slightly delayed due to deviating from their path twice and spending a period in heat, but this was no issue for them.

They were capable individuals who could adjust their speed of travel at will.

"We'll be arriving at Charloin soon."

"Yes. At this pace, we'll soon pass through the Red Twilight Gate, the pride of the southern region's largest trading city."

Kishiar shaded his eyes with his hand, gazing intently at the distant, faint landscape.

The southern branch of the Cavalry was to be established in Charloin, the largest maritime trading city in the southern part of the Empire. The lord governing Charloin, a cadet branch of the fourth great ducal family, Herne, was not particularly welcoming of this. However, Yuder, aware of this, still strongly advocated for its construction there.

The reason was straightforward. It was because of the events that were soon to unfold there.

'While the western Tainu gains profit through land trade with the western nations, southern Charloin connects the north and south through maritime trade. It's an ideal place for the secret influx of foreign cultures, and therefore...'

A port city overflowing with those who could simply flee by boat after committing crimes. Charloin was a perfect breeding ground for illegal activities. In his previous life, this environment had flourished, blossoming into a hub of crime.

The pleasure-loving nobility called it a city of delight and happiness, losing themselves in its allure. Regardless of status, many succumbed to drug addiction and became ensnared in the illegal fighting rings, losing their way in life.

In his previous life, the southern branch of the Cavalry, due to the vehement opposition of these nobles, was initially established in a different city. This caused delays in their operations. What use was it to arrive a step late in matters of security? Without any friendly assistance, the branch alone struggled under these worst-case conditions.

'But this time will be different.'

The opposition to the establishment of the Cavalry branch was the same as in his previous life. In fact, Kishiar had heard through interim reports that the backlash was even stronger.

However, this time, they had the legitimate and healthy Emperor Keilusa backing them, surrounded by numerous allies. Considering the key provided by these allies, now resting in his luggage awaiting its use, nothing felt too challenging.

'In fact... the priority at the southern branch is more this matter than recruiting for the Cavalry.'

Yuder revisited his plans for the southern region before his arrival.

First, upon arrival, he would unhesitatingly force those opposing the construction of the Cavalry branch to shut their mouths with a decisive fist holding the key.

Second, he would seek out the budding illegal fighting rings and drug trades, uprooting them completely and burning them to ashes.

Thirdly, as a final step, they would track down the traces of southern merchants they had missed in the west and simultaneously deal with the adjustments to the Star of Nagran.

'Perfect.'

In reality, accomplishing all these tasks within a few days might seem impossible. But hadn't they been preparing all this time to make it possible?

Yuder glanced sideways at the man striding effortlessly beside him.

"Hmm?"

Somehow noticing the silent gaze, Kishiar immediately turned his head. Their eyes met, and his softened into a warm smile.

An indistinct face that no one could guess the identity of, altered by magic. His hair, changed to a brown hue.

Yet, he was none other than Duke Kishiar La Orr, the Commander of the Cavalry, trusted by all its members and, most of all, by Yuder.

With him by his side, Yuder felt assured, as it had always been so far.

Charloin was always famous for its pleasant weather. The temperature never dropped too low, and with its 'Eternal Sapphire' sea, it was also renowned as a resort destination.

In this giant trading city that also served as a resort, several men and women with somewhat intimidated expressions quietly made their appearance.

"Dagon. Around this street... is this where the Cavalry branch is located?"

"Of course, it is. Didn't you ask the same thing when we arrived?"

"But every time we asked, people looked at us as if we were strange... I just wanted to make sure."

A particularly anxious young boy prodded Dagon, the man he addressed, who turned to him.

"Jack, listen to me. No one here knows that we came from the Star of Nagran's base. We're not fleeing; we chose to come here. You know that, right?"

"Uh, yeah."

"You've seen the letter from Ragnar who left earlier after hearing Robel's advice. If we just get there, we won't have to live like before. If we pass the test... even if not, just securing a contract will allow us to work and live properly."

Silence fell.

Upon hearing the names Robel and Ragnar, those who were anxious clenched their lips, their expressions firming with resolve.

They were Awakeners, former colleagues of Robel at the western branch and survivors from the now-defunct Star of Nagran's western base. Not all were from the western base; some were from the southern base, but their purpose for the long journey was the same.

They had left the chaotic Star of Nagran, aspiring to join the Cavalry.

Had they left the base earlier, they might have already undergone the Cavalry's enlistment test, but there had been a reason for their delay. Doubting Robel's recommendation, they had divided themselves into two groups.

The braver and more skilled advance team went to Charloin first to take the Cavalry's test. After receiving their communication, the follow-up team left the desert base and arrived here as the second group.

It was never easy for several people to leave a place they had been part of at once. But desperation made it all possible.

"Ragnar... he passed, didn't he?"

"Yes. So, we can do it too."

The Awakeners looked at each other, steeling their resolve.

However, upon finally finding the Cavalry's southern branch after asking around, their firm resolve faced the brink of collapse.

"There have been already five complaints about loud noises coming from here today. Five! Do you remember what we decided to do if there was one more complaint? Either pay a fine or leave!"

"The Southern Sapphire Mage Union will never tolerate any group that seeks to tarnish the history of Chaloin! We will protest with a firm resolve here to ensure the safety of Chaloin!"

"Resolve! Commitment! Absolute! Protest!"

"What in the world is happening...?"

The building, seemingly an old structure barely refurbished to hang a sign, appeared acceptable. After all, it was marked 'Cavalry'.

However, instead of candidates for the test, the front was filled with haughty mages in elegant robes and stern-faced officials, looking as if not even a needle could penetrate their seriousness.

"Is this... the Cavalry branch? May I... enter?"

"Are you here to register for the member recruitment test?"

At that moment, someone in a black uniform, looking extremely tired, noticed them while standing with crossed arms in a corner. The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran hesitantly approached him.

"Yes, we are..."

"Right now, as you can see, the main entrance is chaotic, so please use the side door."

"The side door?"

"If you knock on the wall right behind where I'm standing like this, it will open."

The Cavalry member tapped behind him where he leaned. Astonishingly, the wall became semi-transparent, allowing a hand to pass through.

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran realized that this was a creation of someone's power and widened their eyes. Their own base had been protected with various devices to prevent easy access, but they had never managed to make the entrance invisible, even when it was right beside them.

Whoever created this was indeed a remarkable Awakener.

They sneakily entered through the wall, avoiding the eyes of the mages and officials. Just as they were all about to pass through, the tired Cavalry member suddenly cried out in delight, "Ah, there!

Finally, they're here!" However, as the door closed behind them, they could not hear who had arrived.

Chapter 647

‘Utter Chaos’

‘A complete mess.’

That was the first thought that struck Yuder upon arriving at the Charloin's Cavalry branch headquarters.

"Those who threaten Charloin, withdraw at once!"

"Back off!"

"There have been complaints about the building lease... and the noise!"

"Doesn't the Cavalry branch have someone in charge? How can they expect to operate like this! I don't know about other places, but here in the south, they can't get away with such nonsense!"

People from every walk of life had gathered, crowding the front of the branch building, creating a tumultuous scene. It was evident at a glance: mages from various parts of the south, local residents, and frustrated administrators all converged in a chaotic mix.

It was so crowded that the Awakeners, who had come to take their tests under normal circumstances, were nowhere to be seen.

'I knew there was significant opposition, but this is worse than I expected. The members inside the branch must have had a tough time holding out.'

"Hmm. It seems noisier now than when we first started building the main headquarters of the Cavalry on the Imperial Knights' territory."

While Yuder quietly assessed the situation, Kishiar, with his arms crossed, looked at the protesting crowd with a smile and spoke.

"It feels like our Cavalry has really grown, doesn't it? Quite overwhelming, indeed."

"Is that so?"

"Of course. In fact, facing this scene now seems overdue."

In the east, they had already established a base in the territory of Zachlis, whom they already knew, so although there was some resentment from neighboring territories, they hadn't faced direct opposition. In the west, they had preemptively laid the groundwork in Tainu, so there was no one to oppose the construction of the branch there.

However, the south was different. It was a completely new area where direct opposition was inevitable.

Only upon seeing the genuinely intrigued expression on the man's face did Yuder's furrowed brows relax.

"Yuder! It is Yuder, right?"

At that moment, a voice filled with joy pierced through the noisy crowd. A burly man, resembling a bear, wearing a snug uniform with a long hood, rushed over with a laughing face.

"Kurga."

He was one of the members who had shared a room with Yuder when they first joined the Cavalry. Although he wasn't as close to Yuder as Gakane or Kanna, it wasn't accurate to say they had no friendship at all.

Kurga, who had been more distant than others in the past, now approached Yuder with a friendly face, vigorously patting his shoulder and sharing a hearty embrace.

"We've all been waiting for you for a long time! It was a long wait. We did receive a letter from the Commander saying it would be slightly delayed, but still... Oh, by the way, where is the Commander?"

"He's right here."

"Ah!"

Startled by the sudden voice from behind, Kurga almost fell backward but managed to regain his balance.

"Weren't you supposed to come in disguise? What's with this appearance..."

"I just used a magic tool, no need to be so surprised."

"Ah... Ah, I see. That's one way to do it."

Other members of the branch, who had initially been startled by Kishiar's magically altered appearance, reacted in various ways. But Kurga's reaction was uniquely slow.

'He was always a beat behind the other members even when we were in the capital.'

However, Kurga's strength lay in his bear-like, solid, and slow demeanor. He was, to put it nicely, steadfast, or to put it bluntly, indifferent to the point of ignoring insults. He possessed a personality that was rarely swayed by external influences.

Due to this, Yuder had entrusted Kurga with the temporary leadership of the Southern branch, believing in this very trait of his character.

'It seems that my choice was indeed a good one.'

Even amidst the protestors surrounding them, Kurga showed no change in expression. Neither the insults nor the noise seemed to penetrate his ears or eyes.

He was truly the ideal choice to be stationed in the region where the most opposition was anticipated.

"Has this protest been ongoing since the branch was established?"

"Yes, but it's only recently that the number of people has increased so much. We followed the Commander's orders to ignore such noises and just continued with our recruitment efforts, which only led to more people joining the protest day by day."

When Kishiar first received reports of severe opposition to the construction of the branch in the South, he instructed the members there to show no reaction other than what was outlined in the 'official response manual' sent from the headquarters.

And Kurga, along with the other members dispatched to the South, followed these orders impeccably. No matter how much they were provoked, they never lost their temper and steadfastly stuck to the official responses provided by Kishiar, not uttering a word more.

This approach, difficult for many to maintain, was also the best way to infuriate the opposition, if one could manage it.

'And the result of that is the chaos we see today.'

Now, Yuder understood why the protestors were particularly enraged, their eyes bloodshot with anger. Who could have imagined that they, who looked down on these mere commoners, would be so blatantly ignored?

"You've done well. You held on until we arrived."

"Hm? Oh, it wasn't difficult. Some of the others said they were getting tired, but I was fine. Compared to the extreme summer training you had us do, this was nothing."

Kurga grinned.

"So, are we going inside to rest before starting work?"

"No."

Kurga tilted his head at Yuder's firm response.

"Then what?"

"I'd like you to pick out three people who came here first and most frequently from those present here."

"Hmm?"

A short while later.

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, who were busy filling out their application forms with the help of Cavalry members, were startled by a sudden thudding vibration echoing from somewhere.

"Yikes. What's that?!"

"It's not an earthquake, is it?"

"Look over there! The door is opening!"

Someone exclaimed in a remarkably bright voice.

The Awakeners turned to see the branch's main gate, which had been firmly shut until now, smoothly opening. Despite the winter season, the bright and dazzling sunlight of Charloin streamed in through the door, casting the silhouette of someone in backlight.

Initially, they thought the protestors had finally broken through the door, but it was not so. A man with dark hair, seemingly untouched by the bright sunlight, stepped into the branch with a calm yet unwavering stride.

The applicants, unable to discern his identity due to his plain black traveler's clothes instead of a uniform, were puzzled. However, the existing members of the branch recognized him immediately.

"Wow! He's finally here!"

"Now we can finally be relieved!"

Several members of the branch rushed towards the man, cheering. The member helping with the applications also quickly wore a relieved and confident smile.

"What, who is that person?"

As the bewildered Awakeners from the Star of Nagran muttered among themselves, others followed the man with black hair into the building. Two of them were tall, but their features were oddly indistinct and hard to recognize. However, the individuals who entered after the black-haired man invited them in with a "Please, come inside," were distinctly different.

The very people who had been fervently protesting outside just moments ago now entered the branch, their faces ashen and dragging their feet. As they glanced at the man with the black hair, their expressions were a mix of fear and anger, almost blended together.

"Now that we're in a place more suitable for a proper discussion, shall we continue our earlier conversation?"

The man with black hair spoke first, his voice steady, slow, and cold, addressing the protestors. Their faces contorted in dismay, but they did not voice any opposition to the man.

'What in the world is going on...'

The Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, mouths agape, only then noticed that the noise of the protest outside had abruptly ceased, despite the presence of people still lingering around. How could it have become so quiet?

Who exactly was this person?

Amidst the rising questions, Dagon, the de facto leader of the group who had brought them this far, gathered his courage and spoke to the Cavalry member handling the registrations.

"Excuse me. Who is that person? Could he be the Cavalry Commander? We come from a region near the desert in the South, so..."

Though he added more than necessary, perhaps out of fear of appearing suspicious, fortunately, the Cavalry member didn't seem to mind and chuckled.

"No? Ha ha. I see, the applicants wouldn't know. That person is..."

"...The desert?"

At that moment, the man with the black hair, as if having heard the conversation from afar, turned his head.

The moment Dagon's eyes met the terrifyingly black pupils peeking through the man's hair, he recognized who he was.

Chapter 648

Right at that time, the man with black hair turned his head upon hearing a voice from afar.

At the moment their eyes met, Dagon recognized him through the terrifyingly dark pupils beyond the locks of hair.

'That man...! He's the one I encountered in the Great Sarain Forest!'

Memories of the events just before the Western Base disappeared flooded Dagon's mind. There had been a time when a strange monster appeared in the Great Sarain Forest, growing increasingly larger and undying despite the attacks.

Dagon, a member of the attacking squad tasked with protecting the village, had not known then that the creature grew with each assault, rendering all their desperate efforts futile. While debating whether to return to the village for an emergency evacuation, a mysterious Awakener suddenly appeared.

"Cease your attacks and step back. I will handle this from here."

Leaving behind words akin to a suicide wish, the man bravely faced the monster alone, proving his words true. Ultimately, he led the monster to a cliff's edge and triumphantly defeated it.

Afterward, Dagon had to urgently close the Western Base and relocate south, hence never encountering the man again. Learning that he was a member of the Cavalry visiting the Great Sarain Forest, Dagon had shuddered at the thought that he might have been captured.

But the incredible, almost inhuman strength displayed by the Cavalry's man, making the vast Great Sarain Forest seem to respond and judge under his command, remained an unforgettable scene in Dagon's dreams.

In fact, this memory played a significant role in Dagon's decision to apply to the Cavalry, despite having the option to go elsewhere after escaping the Southern Base. He suspected that most of his fellow attacking squad who had escaped with him had chosen the same path due to that day's events.

Now, that unforgettable face stood before Dagon once more.

'Here, at the Cavalry's branch, it's natural... But now he'll know who I am...!'

As Dagon's body tensed in a mix of fear and uncertainty, the man's eyes narrowed. Approaching them, a palpable tension rose among Dagon and the other Awakeners.

"Did you come from the desert?"

"Ah... Yes, yes."

Dagon barely managed to respond, his voice strained and barely audible in his overwhelming anxiety.

'What if he recognizes us and orders our immediate arrest? But I haven't done anything wrong then or now... But if he discovers we're from the Star of Nagran, the others said they'd kill us all... But now that we've left there... Are we safe? What should I do?'

As these thoughts swirled chaotically, Dagon felt his limbs twitch involuntarily and cold sweat bead on his skin. Then, the black-haired man let out a short breath, a sound that might have been mistaken for laughter if not for his unchanging expression.

"You've come from quite far. Are you all together?"

"Yes... Yes."

The fact that so many Awakeners knew each other before even applying to join the Cavalry was unusual. Moreover, their collective decision to apply was even more extraordinary.

However, Dagon was too overwhelmed to contemplate further. He failed to notice the subtle emotion that flickered deep within the eyes of his interlocutor upon hearing his response.

"It seems so. Understood. The first test can be taken immediately upon application. It should not be too difficult for you, so there's no need to be overly anxious."

"Uh... Uhh, oh, yes. Not too difficult, right, yes."

Dagon blurted out a response, utterly unaware of what he was even saying.

"I would like to observe, but I have duties to attend to right now. I hope you all achieve good results."

With those words, the man, having briefly and neatly excused himself, nodded and turned away. Dagon watched him leave in a daze, finally snapping back to reality only after the man had completely disappeared.

'What?'

Did he not recognize me?! Amid a mix of relief and an inexplicable sense of loss, a Cavalry member assisting with the application process smiled and spoke.

"Wow. It's rare for Yuder to initiate conversation with someone. The fact he mentioned passing the first test so casually suggests he sees potential in your abilities."

"Yuder...? Is that his name?"

A colleague beside Dagon cautiously inquired.

"Yes. I thought you would have recognized the name... Haven't you heard? He's famous for single-handedly defeating a massive monster in the Great Sarain Forest. Yuder Aile, the Cavalry's top fighter and assistant to the Cavalry Commander. I thought he became quite well-known after receiving a title that's nearly impossible for a commoner to attain..."

"..."

Dagon's colleagues, still bewildered, finally seemed to grasp something, swallowing hard. It appeared they had just realized that the man they had encountered was the same monstrous figure who had transformed the landscape of the Great Sarain Forest.

'Well, it makes sense. No one here but me was part of the attack squad until the end...'

Dagon sighed deeply. As he was still recovering from the shock, the member in charge of the applications continued to chatter excitedly.

"Yuder is really something else. I don't know how many of you will become our colleagues, but if you join the Cavalry, remember well what Yuder says. You might think I'm exaggerating, but his words have never been wrong. He's the pride and spirit of the Cavalry! If he spoke positively about your first test, it means he's already recognized your skills."

"Uh... Haha. Hardly. He must've been just saying that because we're applicants..."

"Praise? He doesn't do that. He just states facts."

"..."

"That's the spirit of the Cavalry!"

The member grinned and gave a thumbs up.

It seemed he believed that one couldn't join without understanding 'the spirit of the Cavalry.'

'What exactly... is this spirit of the Cavalry?'

Dagon couldn't grasp it at all. Watching the member, who seemed to trust the Cavalry's assistant more than the Commander himself, Dagon briefly doubted whether this was alright, but eventually, he chose not to comment and let it pass.

Shortly after completing their application forms, they all passed the first test with ease, creating a new legend within the ranks about 'Yuder Aile, who could discern an applicant's success upon first sight.' This unfolded just an hour later.

Yuder paused and looked back while walking down the corridor of the building. Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman, disguised with magic tools, and Kurga seemed fine, but the three protest participants, who had been dragging their feet as if on death's door, stopped in their tracks, startled by his gaze.

Without uttering a word, the mere meeting of their eyes had them panic as if facing their doom, evoking a sense of disdain in Yuder.

'These faint-hearted souls, so easily startled by the slightest disturbance, had the audacity to challenge the Cavalry.'

What he had done just before entering the branch was quite straightforward.

He had asked Kurga to identify the three who had been most active and frequent in the protests. These individuals were singled out – a mage, an administrator, and a common citizen, all vehemently condemning the Cavalry at the forefront of their respective groups.

'It's obvious, considering they spend their days and nights here protesting instead of doing their actual jobs.'

These three were specifically chosen to represent and voice the hostile intentions of their groups against the Cavalry.

Until now, the Cavalry had deliberately refrained from responding to their provocations, maintaining an attitude of 'we're just following orders already approved by those above.' They only communicated cooperation recommendations from the Emperor, the High Minister, and the Court Mage Office, as per the law.

However, if they were the sort to quietly back down with just such 'recommendations,' the situation wouldn't have escalated to this point. Those who had powerful people behind them did not seriously listen to the recommendations of a powerless, reclusive Emperor, a High Minister engaged only in bureaucracy without real power, and a Court Mage Office far less influential than the Pearl Tower.

Until now, these individuals, backed by powerful entities, had managed to live without any problems.

But not anymore.

Yuder exchanged a glance with Kishiar, then stepped forward towards the protesters, ready to speak.

"The Commander of the Cavalry, whom you've been so eager to confront, is here now. Let's have a serious discussion about what your grievances are."

Naturally, no one believed his words.

Chapter 649

"What nonsense is this!"

"The person in charge, you say? This place is no stage for a green youth like you, a mere commoner. If you've lost your mind, step down gracefully!"

The reaction to Yuder, who stood alone before the protesting crowd filling the front of the branch, was explosively heated. Not a single soul believed in Yuder's words; the consensus was that a madman had appeared, spouting nonsense.

Unfazed by the numerous jeers and protests, Yuder didn't even blink. As he slightly turned his gaze, Kurga, meeting his eyes, opened his mouth and shouted loudly.

"This man here is indeed the person in charge of the Cavalry! Haven't you all been clamoring for the person in charge to come forward? If so, what seems to be the problem?"

"What?"

The crowd, initially like a swarm of bees with their jeers, recoiled slightly at Kurga's words. He was somewhat familiar to them, and he was properly clad in the Cavalry uniform. But soon after, the brief silence was shattered by roars twice as loud as before.

"If he really is from the Cavalry, it's even more ludicrous! After all the disregard, is this young man, swollen with arrogance, their answer – a mere scapegoat?"

"The Emperor's direct subordinates are a disgrace!"

"Indeed. If he truly is from the Cavalry, then present some evidence! His attire looks like it's come from nowhere – what are we supposed to believe?"

"Since when did the Cavalry Commander have such filthy black hair? I've never heard of Duke Peletta's hair turning black!"

"..."

Yuder intently watched the faces of the loudest agitators. As expected, the three individuals Kurga had pointed out were the main instigators.

They seemed to think that this black-haired youth would soon burst into tears and retreat, overwhelmed by the barrage of insults. But Yuder did the exact opposite.

"...Laughing?"

In the midst of silence, Yuder slightly lifted the corners of his lips into a smile.

His eyes weren't smiling at all, but the pale thin lips, stretched into a long, eerie grin, made several people weakly sense doubt and unease at that moment.

"If you can't believe my words, I have no choice but to prove it. I am a member of the Cavalry and a person in charge worthy of dialogue."

With those words, Yuder suddenly stepped forward, lightly stomping his foot on the ground.

Thump...!

A seemingly light step.

Yet, the repercussion resonated throughout the vicinity.

The vibration, starting from Yuder's foot, spread far and wide, causing buildings to shiver as if struck by an earthquake, and branches from the trees along the walls to break and fall.

The inevitable result was the people, unable to stand on the trembling ground, screaming and sprawling.

"Ah!"

"Good heavens, save us!"

"Mercy!"

After a wave of various screams swept through, those covered in dirt lifted their heads, their faces smeared with terror.

Yuder, standing firmly and upright, quietly tilted his head and asked.

"Just now, I saw a centipede crawling at my feet, and for safety, I caught it... Is this level of power sufficient to converse with you? Or is it still inadequate?"

Indeed, beneath Yuder's foot lay a flattened centipede corpse. But that was just an excuse. Everyone with eyes could feel that what this seemingly calm madman really wanted to flatten was not the centipede, but the protesters present.

With eyes as dark and ominous as the abyss, Yuder swept his gaze over everyone's faces, indifferent as if he were merely looking at the crushed bug under his foot. The chilling intensity of his stare sent shivers down the spines of several onlookers.

"Where in the world did this madman come from...!"

"You... no, who exactly are you? How can someone like you...!"

A man dressed in a fine administrative uniform, his voice trembling, tried to retreat, shifting uneasily, after locking eyes with Yuder. Yuder looked down at him with a cold detachment and introduced himself.

"I am Yuder Aile, the assistant to the Commander of the Cavalry."

In truth, this conversation should have taken place when Yuder first stepped forward.

It was remarkable how, initially, not a single question was asked, not even his name was inquired, until they experienced his fiery display. Yuder chose not to point out their sudden politeness.

'Typical of such people.'

The crowd might have been frightened by Yuder's display of power, but it wasn't the sole reason for their newfound respect. The real reason they were cowering was Yuder's unabashed audacity, even after such a wild act.

In their minds, only a 'truly high-ranking person' could behave so recklessly and still remain impudent. It seemed they only pretended to listen and treat someone as an equal after being shown their place.

'But still... seeing them all prostrate like this is quite a sight.'

Unbeknownst to them, Duke Peletta, the leader of the Cavalry, Kishiar, was also standing among them. Yuder allowed a cold smile to slip as he observed those who had knelt before Kishiar.

That smile sent a chill through the protesters, draining them of the courage to speak further.

"Now then... the one in the red administrative robe, the one beside in the green mage's robe, and over here in the grey clothes. It seems we might now be able to have a proper conversation. What do you think?"

With that, the entire confrontation came to an end.

Yuder confidently led the three stunned individuals into the branch, his tone shifting to a more formal register as soon as the situation was resolved. This change only heightened the protesters' sense of dread.

"Please, take a seat over here."

Kurga, showing some quick thinking, led the three to a space for them to sit side by side. Anticipating that Yuder would sit across from them, they tensed up, but their confusion grew when a man with a vague appearance and brown hair took his seat before Yuder.

"Who is he?"

Throughout the commotion caused by Yuder, this man had simply stood back, arms crossed, watching. Seemingly unimportant, his sudden forwardness was disconcerting.

'Is he also a member of the Cavalry? Or someone else entirely?'

Regardless of whether they surreptitiously glanced or wondered about the identity of Kishiar, who had altered his appearance, Yuder didn't sit until Kishiar had comfortably found his place. Only then did Yuder take his seat beside him.

As soon as he sat, the atmosphere froze over once again, like a lake in the northern winter.

"Before we begin, I've already introduced myself. Now, I'd like to hear each of your names."

Ordinarily, a few pleasantries would be exchanged before starting a conversation, but Yuder had no intention of extending such courtesies. His cold demeanor in demanding their names first left the three protesters unable to hide their anger. However, perhaps still vividly recalling the earthquake-like experience, they promptly opened their mouths to speak.

The man in the administrative robe was a seventh-rank official from Charloin, while the mage belonged to the 'Sapphire Mage Union,' the largest mage coalition in the south. The remaining individual was from a trading guild that had been conducting business in Charloin for generations, seemingly holding some significant position in the city's overall merchants' association.

They tried to emphasize their importance, hoping to intimidate Yuder slightly, but they couldn't have imagined that Yuder had already dismissed their names from his mind upon hearing them.

The only thing Yuder retained was the sliver of useful information hidden within their grandiose introductions.

'As expected, all three have connections with the nobles opposing the Emperor. They must be motivated by the anticipation of future benefits should this endeavor succeed.'

Not everyone who had come to protest was driven by such motives. Yuder would have bet that many believed they were genuinely protecting the safety of Charloin.

It was these individuals, who wouldn't normally have stepped forward, who were incited by those seeking political gain – the very 'voices' who had taken it upon themselves to lead this cause.

In essence, if these instigators were dealt with, the rest of the problem would likely resolve itself.

'Now, let's deal with them one by one.'

"So, what exactly are your demands?"

Yuder asked impassively, causing each of the three to furrow their brows.

The mage in the robe was the first to clear his throat and speak up.

"Don't you understand even after seeing all this? We cannot tolerate a dangerous group like the Cavalry entering Charloin, the largest city in the south. Why must you establish a branch in Charloin? Just a bit further south, there are suitable areas like Mclara."

"You're right," agreed the official. "Many administrators in Charloin share the same concern. Even though the High Minister has recommended cooperation, it overlooks the unique characteristics of our region. Moreover, the transaction regarding this building intended for the branch was far from clean. Lord Giol Terme, a third-rank official, demands clarification and adjustment."

Lastly, the merchant added his piece.

"Charloin is trembling with anxiety due to the Awakeners coming for your assessment or whatever it is. The trading guilds have suffered significant business losses. Shouldn't the Cavalry take responsibility for this?"

Their statements were lengthy, but could be summarized succinctly:

'Such nonsense, drawn out so long.'

Yuder, with an expressionless face, turned to look at Kurga.

"Kurga."

"Huh? Yeah?"

"It seems we'll need to write down and organize these demands. Could you bring some paper?"

"Paper? Okay."

Kurga, slightly puzzled, brought over the paper, which was then placed on the long table.

"The pen is here, so you can write with this."

"That's alright. I have my pen here."

Yuder produced a pen from his pocket. At that moment, the official's eyes twitched nervously.

'...What's that?'

Chapter 650

"That's alright. I have my pen here."

Yuder produced a pen from his pocket. At that moment, the official's eyes twitched nervously.

'...What's that?'

Simultaneously, the mage who sneakily glanced at the yellow magic stone brooch, which had subtly revealed itself from the flipped edge of Yuder's coat, widened his eyes slightly in recognition.

"That brooch, adorned with a magic stone and inscriptions... Could it be?"

The merchant, too, was not merely a passive observer. He scrutinized the gloves on Yuder's pen-holding hand with a suspicious gaze, blinking rapidly.

'I didn't notice before... but those gloves, now that I see them...?'

Silence fell.

'It's as if I can hear their thoughts rolling in their eyes.'

Yuder pretended not to notice the three onlookers who had begun to scrutinize their surroundings with renewed interest, focusing instead on documenting their statements on paper.

Writing was merely a tool for him. The true spectacle lay in the attention these three rascals directed towards other aspects of the scene. If they were causing a stir here, they must be quite greedy. Yet, this also implied their insignificance within their respective groups.

Why would those with power, skill, and connections bother coming here? It's the ones without prospects of success who resort to such measures.

Such individuals often fail to see the bigger picture, getting buried in short-term gains and obsessively clinging to connections, all the while forsaking any semblance of loyalty or honor.

Initially, when they followed him here, they were almost out of their minds. But sitting quietly in this space, anyone would regain their composure.

And so, they began to notice things previously overlooked.

Yuder had brought two items with him, deliberately selected before leaving the capital: a magic pen exclusively used by High Minister Hebreyna Reiflang, and a magic stone brooch sent from the Western Mage Union.

The High Minister's magic pen, which could turn water into ink, was custom-made, with the High Minister's name and family crest prominently engraved. Though the High Minister's position wasn't remarkably powerful, Hebreyna Reiflang herself hailed from a prestigious noble family.

Her lack of immense power was only relative to the four great dukedoms; to a lowly 7th-rank official from the south, she was an unreachable figure of authority.

The 7th-rank official, upon seeing Yuder Aile effortlessly using a pen signifying deep personal ties with the High Minister, must have thought:

'I've never heard of the High Minister having a personal connection with a Cavalry member... Was the cooperation directive more than just a routine recommendation? Could it be...'

'If I make a bad impression here, will my name reach the High Minister directly?'

Such thoughts were inevitable.

'The 3rd-rank official he mentioned earlier must be his direct backers, probably from the noble faction. But here, we have the High Minister.'

To the officials, the high minister was the highest authority. Desiring to impress a 3rd-rank official and inadvertently inciting the high minister's wrath, leading to a sudden loss of livelihood, was not an experience they would welcome.

'Even if he does, there's no belief that his backer will take responsibility for the aftermath.'

In the silence, a bead of sweat formed on the forehead of the 7th-rank official.

At the same moment, the mage harbored a thought similar yet distinct from the official's.

'I'm not mistaken. That's undoubtedly the insignia of the Western Mage Union, the talk of recent times. And that embedded yellow magic stone, an unseen top-quality product... Could it possibly be from the highly-valued Great Sarain Forest Mine? And if they've even engraved magic onto it...!'

The Southern Sapphire Mage Union, where he hailed from, differed greatly from the research-focused Western Mage Union. To put it kindly, it was a place of ancient tradition; alternatively, it had long been engrossed in serving nobility with magic tools rather than pursuing magic research.

The majority of its mages had long given up on advancing in the Pearl Tower, returning to their roots due to their lack of magic talents. Even though they could have dedicated themselves to research despite lacking magic aptitude, the Sapphire Mage Union did not take much pleasure in that either.

Effectively, they were more akin to merchants who enjoyed crafting magic tools for profit than true mages. Hence, they were quick to recognize the latest and finest magic tools, always envying other mages who gained honor through proper research.

The Sapphire Mage Union might have had influence locally, but among mages, they had little to boast about. In contrast, the Western Mage Union had recently made a name across the continent by successfully developing a grand magic spell, a feat not attempted for centuries. Their years of arduous research in the Great Sarain Forest, leading to the discovery of the continent's largest magic stone mine, was another testament to their accomplishments.

To the mages of that time, they were adventurers who had struck a hidden gold mine.

The mage recalled the brooch adorned with the bold emblem of the Western Mage Union.

Typically, a mage wouldn't bestow such a precious and painstakingly crafted item on an Awakener. However, if that man was indeed 'Yuder Aile', then it made sense that the Western Mage Union would gift it to him.

'If he's the Yuder Aile of the great 'Yuder No. 1' magic spell announced by the Western Mage Union, then it's only natural they'd spare no expense...!'

It was a monumental magic spell that he couldn't dream of creating even in a lifetime. If the person who knew all about that magic, which every mage wondered about, was truly here, it was an astounding revelation.

For the first time in a long while, the mage felt the blood of a mage boiling within him. He was irresistibly eager to ask Yuder about the brooch, the magic stone, and anything regarding the 'Yuder No. 1' of the Western Mage Union.

Yet, Yuder, unmoved by the mage's eager gaze, continued to silently jot down his earlier words on paper. It was then that the mage realized anew the demands he had made as a representative of the Sapphire Mage Union were likely unwelcome from Yuder Aile and the Cavalry's standpoint.

'Ah, that's right. Damn! If I had known someone like him would be here, I wouldn't have spoken so harshly earlier... Now, our union's image must be tarnished. How do I handle this?'

While the mage jittered his knee nervously, the third and last protester from the trading house was peeling the skin off his dry lips for a slightly different reason than the previous two.

'Those guys... what are they? How can they nonchalantly wear such incredible items, covered in dirt as if they're nothing!'

It all began with the gloves Yuder was wearing. The merchant was initially astonished by the sophisticated magic pen that required no ink, but upon closer inspection, he realized that the black gloves adorning Yuder's pen-holding hand were an even more luxurious product.

Curious, they peered under the table, only to find that the neatly placed shoes under Yuder's chair were crafted from a more expensive and inconspicuous leather than the gloves. However, what truly shocked the merchant was something else.

At first barely noticeable due to their unassuming appearance, the shoes of the man seated next to Yuder were even more luxurious than Yuder's own. The merchant thought he was mistaken, but he wasn't. Raising his head to scrutinize the man's clothing, he started noticing incredible items.

Leather treated with hard-to-find special drugs and liquids. An old-looking but remarkably clean and unraveled special fabric. Small decorations clearly crafted from numerous painstakingly cut and polished precious materials and magic stones.

To the untrained eye, these items might appear as mere ordinary garb that any mercenary or traveler could wear. However, the merchant, who had spent his life in Charloin, a place where rare items from across the continent passed through, could not overlook their true worth.

As the merchant assessed the value of each item the man wore, he soon realized that attempting to calculate their collective worth was futile, a realization that brought with it a dizzying sense of awe.

'How can one person possibly wear all these items? And why am I only realizing this now?'