

Turning 651

Chapter 651

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

The reason was, of course, due to the transformative magic tools worn exclusively by Kishiar and Nathan Zuckerman. These tools, crafted hundreds of years ago, possessed effects far more powerful than similar contemporary devices. Not only could they alter appearances, but they also slightly blurred the perception of those who saw them, making them virtually unrecognizable even to skilled mages.

Although once the transformed state was recognized, the blurring effect diminished, this was irrelevant to those present.

Yuder meticulously and slowly noted every statement before setting down his pen, at which point the three petitioners simultaneously twitched as if on cue.

"I have recorded all the demands made to the Cavalry. Please review them and let me know if anything is amiss."

The three scanned the blunt statements scrawled on the paper, their eyes darting restlessly.

After a moment, the official cleared his throat and spoke first.

"Well... I've read it. However, it seems there were some communication issues..."

"What do you mean by 'communication issues'? Can you be more specific?"

Yuder asked, his face betraying no understanding of the implied meaning.

'Is he genuinely asking, or does he want to see us bend over backwards...!'

The seventh-rank official's face cycled through various hues before finally turning beet red.

"Ahem, ahem. This part here..."

"Ah. You mean the part about the Cavalry's acquisition of this building for the southern branch being less than straightforward."

Perhaps it was his emotionless, icy voice. Yuder Aile had the uncanny ability to make his words clearly audible without raising his voice.

Despite his earlier statement being precisely repeated, the official felt as if his true intentions were being laid bare for all to see and subtly covered his eyes with his hand.

"That's right."

"You did say you wanted an explanation, but are you now suggesting otherwise?"

"Well, upon reflection, there was no issue with the submission of the related documents. Our request for an explanation was primarily due to the concerns of third-rank official Lord Giol Terme, who was refused a conversation for transaction verification with the original owner of the building. But now, I think such verification may not be immediately necessary."

The seventh-rank official smoothly shifted the blame to his superior, the third-rank official, his eyes darting around as he spoke rapidly.

"So, what I mean is, the explanation and adjustment I requested earlier may have sounded more abrupt than intended. I'd like to rephrase it as a simple verification of tasks, and discuss the rest after the Cavalry recruitment and other urgent matters are concluded."

Yuder alternated between the written words and the official's face.

"Weren't you in a hurry for an explanation earlier? According to Kurga, you've been coming here daily for it, so I assumed it was urgent."

"..."

"Didn't you say that, Kurga?"

"Hmm- yes. That's right."

‘Enough checking!’ the official inwardly shouted, though Yuder continued speaking with an unfazed expression.

"In fact, the explanation you seek is not so difficult. If the southern administrative office needs it, the Cavalry can bring all the relevant documents regarding the building sale from the capital. However, meeting the original owner now or later seems unlikely."

"Why is that?"

"The original owner of this building is currently busy in the capital, serving as the high minister. It would be challenging to request her presence here to confirm the transaction."

At these words, the thoughts of the seventh-rank official temporarily halted.

After a moment, he stammered, doubting his own ears.

"The high minister, you say? That's impossible. Our information indicates...!"

"The name of the official owner differs because this place was originally a joint family property of the high minister's maternal family, entangled in inheritance issues. But in reality, it belongs to her. After confirming everything in the capital, a representative of the Reiflang family and the Commander of the Cavalry must have legally concluded the sale and submitted the confirmation."

"This can't be."

The building, sought by the Cavalry for a local branch, was located in the old city of Charloin. It was in a prime location but had been neglected for a long time.

A third-rank official, who had long coveted the building, thinking it a fine asset after some repairs, became furious when the Cavalry suddenly bought it to establish a branch. It was more the fact that a dangerous group from outside dared to enter Charloin than a mere aversion to their presence that sparked his anger, something the seventh-rank official knew.

‘I had wondered how the Cavalry managed to buy it from the real owner...!’

In cases of historic buildings, such complications in inheritance were not uncommon. The mistake was not investigating the building's history thoroughly, especially since it had been neglected for so long.

Officials often summoned people to recheck legally concluded transactions, a method frequently used to harass others, knowing they were in a position of power.

But how could they dare to summon the high minister to the south for this?

The high minister would immediately realize how the southern officials intended to ruin the transaction.

‘Accusing the Cavalry of deliberately hiding that the building belonged to the high minister would be madness... I've completely misjudged this.’

The face of the seventh-rank official turned deathly pale. He muttered, barely able to speak, "I didn't know that. Such a transaction doesn't need verification. I will return and report this."

Yuder's eyes narrowed slightly, watching him.

‘Securing this building for the Cavalry's branch was a wise decision.’

While Yuder had recommended Charloin as the location for the southern branch of the Cavalry, it was Kishiar who astutely acquired this building. He had foreseen such an eventuality and acted a step ahead of the opposition.

A smile flickered in their eyes as they briefly met glances. Even as Kishiar, disguised, openly grinned, the official remained oblivious.

Next was the turn of the mage.

Having witnessed the official's retreat, the mage opened his mouth with a somewhat intimidated expression.

"I... Our union may have had a slight misunderstanding that I would like to correct, if I may."

"What part are you referring to?"

"While I did say earlier that the Cavalry could be somewhat dangerous, that was more the opinion of the uninformed members of our union, not necessarily my own," the mage stated, evading responsibility in a manner very similar to the official, and forcing an awkward smile.

"I personally, having come here, am willing to help the assistant of the Cavalry Commander. I am not unaware of the impressive feats you accomplished recently in the West with the Western Mage Union."

"Didn't you recommend relocating our branch to an area like Mclara? Does that mean you think it's acceptable for the Cavalry's branch to be in Charloin?"

The mage's lips twitched at the tone that seemed to seek confirmation of his vague statements.

'Damn. I don't want to be that explicit... But if it means getting even a bit more information about the magic stone mine and 'Yuder No.1,' it might be worth appeasing them for now. As long as the others in the union don't find out I said this.'

"No, no. That's a good area too. But since the Cavalry has already secured a building for their branch in Charloin, what can we do? It's best to continue what we've started. I think it's fine."

"I see. Then I will amend your statement accordingly here."

"..."

"Just so you know, once the final draft of this document is complete, to prevent any misunderstandings, we plan to obtain signatures from all three of you who are present."

The signature required a written name and a confirmation phrase. This meant that even if the union later questioned what had happened, it would be difficult to retract a statement that seemed like a mere slip of the tongue. The mage, not expecting such thoroughness from someone of commoner origin, turned a shade very similar to that of the seventh-rank official.

Before the mage could say more, Yuder turned his attention to the third and last person, the merchant, who had already broken into a heavy sweat even before the start.

"If you have anything to correct, please speak now. Do you have anything?"

"No... I... "

Chapter 652

"If you have anything to correct, please speak now. Do you have anything?"

"No... I..." stammered the merchant, his gaze wavering uncertainly between the paper where his statement was written, the face of Yuder, and Kishiar, who was sitting beside him. Recognizing the extraordinary items adorned by Kishiar, the merchant felt a chill of realization, making him the only one in the room able to somewhat accurately assess the vague figure of the man.

The merchant pondered, 'I recall now, that man took his seat before the monster called Commander's assistant. I had thought they, being commoners, simply sat without manners, but perhaps there's more to it.'

His mind was swirling with various assumptions, but he arrived at a single conclusion.

'In any case, someone wealthy enough to casually wear such items, yet remain silent and observe the situation, must have an agenda!'

The realization that a person of immense wealth was present without revealing his identity or taking any action struck the merchant with an unknown fear, more daunting than anything else.

Had he been smarter or more aware of the latest rumors about the Cavalry, he might have guessed Kishiar's identity more accurately and been less startled. In his perception, Duke Peletta was someone unlikely to attend such an event.

Yuder, who had been keenly observing the merchant's changing expressions, coolly judged the situation.

'It's difficult to imagine a Duke of imperial descent sitting here incognito. If he were to come, he'd make a grand entrance like he does in the West.'

Whether Duke Peletta became the new owner of the divine sword or was diligently playing the role of the Cavalry Commander, it mattered not. In their perception, Duke Peletta was a flamboyant man who loved attention and lacked the intellect for complex political maneuvers.

The silent, disguised figure sitting calmly did not fit the image of Duke Peletta. It was naturally assumed that such characteristics cannot be hidden.

Thus, even when Kishiar, in disguise, boldly took his seat before Yuder, and Yuder moved as usual, no one suspected the presence of the Cavalry Commander. They simply assumed the person to be an impolite commoner or, like the merchant, someone of even greater unknown power.

This was the trap of perception crafted by the image Kishiar had cultivated over the years.

'The more Kishiar conceals himself, the more those who judge by appearances alone fall into doubt and fear.'

Shortly thereafter, the merchant, sweating profusely, spoke up.

"I wish to retract everything I said earlier," he declared.

The officials and the mage looked at the merchant in astonishment. However, Yuder remained unperturbed.

"Do you wish to retract your statement all of a sudden? You were seeking compensation for commercial losses due to the recruitment of the Cavalry... Should I take it that you no longer require it?"

"Yes. We are settled. Another trade group might come, but for us, it's done!"

The merchant, even without being asked by Yuder, hastily made excuses for his change of mind. Then he suddenly got up from his seat in a hurry, making an excuse that something urgent had come up.

"A pressing matter that requires leaving before our discussion concludes? It must be truly urgent," noted Yuder calmly.

"Yes, lately my memory... has not been serving me well, leading to situations like this," said the merchant.

"Ah, that must be quite a struggle, especially working in the trade guild with such a problem."

Until then, Kishiar, who had been sitting quietly, spoke for the first time. He looked intently at the merchant, offering words of comfort. Though his words seemed warm and genuine, the merchant, upon meeting his gaze, felt a mix of unknown fear, shame, and anger.

For a merchant who relied on his memory, admitting its failure and receiving consolation was a deeply embarrassing matter.

'I didn't mean it... Damn it!'

"Ah, well, I shall see you another time," said the merchant, his face clearly expressing his desire never to meet again. He hurriedly left the room as if fleeing from something.

Yuder, in the ensuing silence, drew long lines through the merchant's words with his pen. The scratching sound of the pen on paper resonated loudly in everyone's ears.

"Hmm... The document will need to be rewritten on a new sheet. Kurga, please take care of it."

"Of course. Just give me a moment."

"..."

As the new paper was brought and Yuder picked up his pen, the official and the mage, who had been biting their lips, spoke almost simultaneously, their eyes tightly shut.

"Wait...! Please, just a moment. I also...!"

"Hold on! Before you rewrite, please consider this side too...!"

Startled, the two looked at each other. They were embarrassed and frantic, having been caught trying to back out first.

'No, I was trying to get out first, but that guy...!'

'I need to leave before him to save face!'

It's human nature to become anxious and feel the need to act when seeing others take initiative.

And Yuder knew exactly how to fan the flames of their urgency.

"So... you're saying you want me to revise what I just wrote? From the Cavalry's perspective, what's been stated so far seems sufficient."

The official and the mage's expressions twisted when Yuder, who had readily accepted the merchant's request to disregard his statement, suddenly showed resistance to their similar request.

"No, it's not about making revisions. We want to treat it as if it never happened...!"

"Yes, that's what I mean too."

"Then, doesn't that mean all the requests you've made to the Cavalry for explanations so far will end without any conclusion?"

"That's...!"

"That doesn't seem like something you would want. To make it as if it never happened seems a bit too much."

'Why is he suddenly playing dumb and refusing! He didn't do this with the merchant! What's his intention! That damned man!'

Who were they to blame? They had been the ones insisting on explanations from the Cavalry, even staging protests despite numerous official responses.

As Yuder impassively shook his head, the official and the mage grew increasingly desperate. If they could erase today's conversation, they could return to their group with some excuse and change their stance, but if things remained as they were, they risked being blamed and suffering losses.

As they struggled with their internal turmoil, Kishiar, who had been observing the scene with amusement, interjected.

"Hmm, then there seems to be only one solution."

"What would that be?"

As if they had seen a lifeline descend from the heavens, two individuals urgently inquired,

"By recording this entire process, including the request to make it as if it never happened, and having everyone present vow to it, the matter should be resolved cleanly. Adding a clause that forbids anyone not present here from speaking of it will make it as if it never happened, and thus, the concerns of the Cavalry will not come to pass."

"...What does that mean...?"

The signature had evolved into a vow. Unlike a mere signature, a vow was imbued with magic power, making it impossible to casually break. However, Yuder calmly nodded in agreement to Kishiar's suggestion.

"That seems like a good approach. If the two of you agree, then the Cavalry shall proceed in that manner."

It was a strange logic. However, driven by the fear that they might be the ones to bear the brunt of the consequences, the seventh-rank official and the mage eventually agreed to the proposal.

After completing the vow with Yuder, they could only leave after reluctantly agreeing to never repeat the same protest in front of the Cavalry's office again, their spirits and energy seemingly drained from their faces.

After their departure, the street, once filled with protesters, now lay empty in front of the office. Kurga and the members of the Cavalry cheered.

"Unbelievable! They've completely disappeared!"

"This isn't just for today, right? It's all settled now, isn't it?"

"Exactly. Yuder and the Commander have settled everything!"

The members, feeling a wave of relief, surrounded Yuder with beaming smiles. Kishiar was also there, but no one dared approach the Commander, even though his face was disguised.

It took Yuder a while to extricate himself from the crowd. Kishiar, who had been watching with a smile, gently tousled Yuder's hair to fix the disheveled parts.

'Now, we've silenced all those who opposed us... Time to move on to the next step.'

Chapter 653

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Yuder had initially anticipated that at least one individual, lost in their delusion, would continue to spout nonsense to the very end. If that had been the case, they were prepared to revive the memory of the 'centipede catching' display they had shown in front of the branch. Fortunately for Yuder, and thankfully for those involved, such a situation did not arise.

If those who were quelled today returned to their groups and conveyed the day's events accurately, it was unlikely that such an incident would occur again.

‘They wouldn’t want to be treated as incompetent for surrendering without a fight upon meeting me, so they’ll surely choose their words carefully.’

To convince their superiors that their retreat was the only option, they would have to argue that the magnificence of the Cavalry was the sole reason for their decision. The more they insisted on this, the less likely it was that the higher-ups would underestimate the Cavalry, which was a significant advantage for Yuder.

‘Opposition may not cease entirely, but that’s not an immediate concern.’

"Commander, if you're not too tired, how about we head to the bustling streets of Charloin for a stroll?"

"That sounds wonderful," Kishiar replied with a sparkle in his eye.

"How about staying out for dinner if it gets too late?"

"If it appears we will be delayed, that would indeed be the better option."

Unaware of the subtle implications in Kishiar's words, Yuder replied in a very formal tone, yet their opinions naturally aligned. Kishiar flashed a smile and turned to Nathan Zuckerman.

The knight, understanding his lord's gaze, raised his hand to signal his decision to not follow.

"I need to contact the members of the Peletta Knights in the south. Please, take care of the duke."

"Understood. Take care, Nathan. If anything arises, contact us through this branch."

"Of course."

Kishiar playfully tapped the shoulder of his quick-witted subordinate.

Upon Yuder announcing their intent to explore Charloin, members of the southern branch, including Kurga, marveled in genuine admiration.

"Despite traveling non-stop to get here and immediately dealing with the troublemakers, you're now heading out again? How is such stamina possible? Are we even the same species?"

"Do we need to accompany you?"

Their concern was appreciated, but unnecessary. Yuder had visited Charloin several times in a previous life and did not require guidance. When Yuder shook his head, the members understood this and nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps it's more productive to worry about those who might trouble Yuder rather than Yuder himself..."

"I'm exhausted just from sitting all day dealing with visitors. You're truly remarkable."

"That's because you're lacking in stamina. Haven't you been skipping basic fitness training since you arrived here?"

"Keep it down! If Yuder hears that, I'm done for..."

'I've heard everything.'

Yuder, considering the branch's difficulty in venturing out due to the noisy protesters, decided to enhance the basic fitness training in comparison to what was planned for other branches.

"Before we head out, there's something I came to receive."

"Something to receive? What's that?"

"Oh, that..."

Kurga belatedly realized what Yuder meant and responded in understanding.

"You remember the favor you left with me before leaving?" Kurga asked, confirming its importance.

"Yes," Yuder affirmed.

"I've been organizing it with the others during this time. Here."

Kurga handed over a paper densely filled with writings. The members, peeking over, widened their eyes in surprise.

"Huh? Is this... Didn't we just ask them casually when recruiting? Was there a reason behind it?"

"What is it?" another queried.

"The locations of the lodgings where the Cavalry applicants are staying!"

"Why do we need this now? What are you planning to do with it?"

There was, of course, a reason. The locations of these lodgings were key clues in uncovering what they sought.

'The lodgings of those who came to apply are usually clustered in similar areas.'

Where inns congregated, so too did taverns and various entertainment establishments. It was common for inns to also run restaurants or pubs.

This meant that the operators of illegal fighting rings targeting the Awakeners, and the traces of drug dealings, would likely be found in these crowded areas.

'These parasites cannot survive without a host.'

In his previous life, Yuder had only begun clamping down on the illegal fighting rings and drug trade after they had become rampant, making the need to search for leads unnecessary. Now, earlier in the timeline, the search might be more challenging, but Yuder knew the ultimate outcome would be the same and felt no anxiety.

Yuder quickly scanned the paper Kurga had given him and identified two main areas where the majority of the Cavalry applicants were staying. He then returned the paper, informing the members of their new task.

"Until now, it was difficult to go outside due to the noisy troublemakers, but that won't be the case moving forward. Starting tomorrow, we'll be catching and burning those leeches hiding and lurking in Charloin."

"Burn them? What do you mean?"

"I'll visit the places first and then inform you tomorrow. No need to waste time."

The members blinked, then understood Yuder's words in their own way.

"Ah... Is this similar to what we did in the west? Leave it to us! We've been itching to smash something for a while."

Satisfied with their response, Yuder nodded and left the branch.

Kishiar was waiting outside, having secured a carriage. Yuder climbed aboard without hesitation, and soon they were alone.

"Have you found the places you wanted to see?"

"Yes. Kurga was quite helpful."

"Everyone's been working diligently, even amidst the busyness. That's good."

"I think their physical fitness has dropped a bit from staying inside all the time, so I plan to help them improve that."

The members would have screamed if they heard, but Kishiar merely laughed silently.

"So, where does the assistant want to go today?"

"There are two places I plan to visit."

One was an area with cheap inns, and the other, a bustling district with relatively expensive hotels. This division arose due to the varying financial capabilities of the applicants.

Yuder explained why he intended to visit these places and briefly mentioned today's objective.

"Somewhere in those two areas, there must be an illegal fighting ring and the drugs we saw in the west, originating from Southern merchants. I want to find and eradicate these elements beforehand."

"I'm an expert in such matters," Kishiar declared, crossing his legs and tilting his head in a carefree manner, a slight lift at the corners of his lips. Despite his face being obscured by a disguise, an oddly decadent and dangerous aura seemed to hover over his features in an instant.

"Since it's a bit early for dinner... how about we start by visiting some places for a quick look?"

The first stop for them was an area abundant with cheap inns. Yuder looked around a few times, feeling a sense of familiarity.

"Things are a bit different from what I remember... but I think I've been here in my previous life. Back then, it wasn't a place fit for stepping foot in."

The memory of people intoxicated by drugs, sprawled amidst filth, overlaid the current, somewhat shabby but relatively clean alleys before fading away.

'So this was its original state.'

"Do you have any particular store in mind?"

Kishiar asked this, looking at Yuder, who was surveying the area. It seemed that today, Kishiar was entirely willing to leave the choice of destination up to Yuder.

After a moment's consideration, Yuder pointed to one place.

"That inn seems to be the largest around here. Shall we stop by?"

The chosen location was a place that sold both food and drink, with the entire first floor open, extending tables to the outside. People sat at these outdoor tables, engaged in loud conversations, drinking, or enjoying card games.

"Nice. How about we join those playing cards over there?"

As soon as Kishiar suggested this and they sat down with a light beer each, he started offering unsolicited advice to the players at the next table.

"Hmm, I wouldn't play that card right now. It wouldn't be too late to play it after waiting a bit, right?"

"Eh?"

It was common in such inexpensive taverns for bystanders to offer advice during a game. The semi-intoxicated card players naturally followed Kishiar's suggestions, and as his advice turned out to be spot on, they were quite amazed.

"You seem to have some experience with cards, huh?"

"I have a bit of a knack for it."

"You don't seem like you're from the south... Maybe the central region?"

"Something like that."

It was the first time Yuder had seen Kishiar blend in with others in this manner, and he hadn't expected him to do so naturally. Yuder, who had grown up a commoner, watched in awe as Kishiar, who easily ingratiated himself with the people, even managed to draw Yuder into their circle.

After a few rounds of light wins and losses, Kishiar casually broached the main topic.

"By the way, do you know of any places nearby where more interesting games are played?"

Chapter 654

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"More interesting games? Are you talking about dice games or something of that sort?"

"No. The fun I seek is... this."

Kishiar tapped lightly on the back of the card, adorned with a gold coin pattern, and smiled.

"Money?"

"It was good to come to Charloin with a purpose, but then I realized I was short on lodging money. I wouldn't mind sleeping in the streets alone, but now I have companions."

Kishiar continued speaking while expertly shuffling the cards.

"That's why I'm looking for an interesting game. Something that could fill the shortfall in our travel expenses."

This meant he was searching for a gambling game involving stakes of money. Yuder didn't miss the slight change in the expressions of those who had been casually flipping cards.

"If you came to Charloin for a purpose... You're not, by any chance, 'those people'?"

The person sitting next to Kishiar gestured subtly towards a direction. It was towards the street where one could catch a glimpse of the top of the southern branch building of the Cavalry.

"Right. Haven't you seen more of our kind around here lately?"

"Hmm. Well, yes."

Despite their conversation hinting that Kishiar and Yuder were Awakeners who had come to apply to the Cavalry, the card players didn't seem overly surprised.

Without fear or hesitation, as they subtly met each other's gaze, Yuder was certain Kishiar had picked the right people to glean information from.

"You seem to have just average skills in the game. Aren't you looking into too dangerous a way to earn travel money? The games where you can make money are totally different from this kind of play."

"Oh, is that how it seemed?"

Kishiar cheekily responded.

"You all might have been too drunk to remember, but I've participated in four rounds since I joined this table. Win, lose, win, lose, and now it's ongoing. Does anyone remember by how many points I won and lost?"

"When you won, it was with a 5-point difference from the second place, and when you lost, it was by 5 points to the first place."

The previously silent Yuder answered, causing the men playing the card game to look at each other. In disbelief, they counted on their fingers, trying to recall the events. After a moment, they all fell silent.

"...It's true."

Simply controlling winning and losing was something a skilled player could easily do. But to alternate wins and losses by the same score difference without arousing any suspicion from others was truly an astonishing feat.

"That... Is that your ability? Did you use your power?"

"No. My power has nothing to do with this."

"Then how..."

"I'm just naturally good at this. Maybe I have a good sense."

Kishiar casually answered, shaking the cards in his hand.

"If I win this round too, by a 5-point margin, would you tell me some places where we can play a decent game?"

"Alright. Let's see you try."

What had been a light-hearted game before now took on a heavier, tenser atmosphere. The men stopped drinking and watched Kishiar intently, making sure he didn't use any small tricks.

Yet, despite this, the flag of victory was claimed by Kishiar La Orr.

"Exactly a 5-point difference. It's over."

"..."

Everyone fell silent at the last card Kishiar laid down.

"There was definitely no trickery..."

"He just said he's got a good sense."

As Kishiar bantered, the men scrutinized his cards, flipping them over and peering closely. Amidst their inspection, Kishiar, who leaned back nonchalantly in his chair, turned to Yuder and spoke.

"Ah. Perhaps I've played the game too earnestly; my throat is parched. It would be nice if someone awarded me with a cold beer."

"...Just ask for it normally."

Though Yuder spoke thus, he lightly picked up Kishiar's beer glass and brought it to his lips. He didn't forget to use a slight power to cool the beer inside.

The man who gulped down several refreshing sips widened his eyes and expressed his gratitude.

"There's no fun in just receiving. Anything received as a reward always tastes better. Even a 70-year-old Raifa wine wouldn't seem as sweet and refreshing as this single sip right now."

"..."

It seemed like an exaggerated comparison, but fortunately, he appeared satisfied.

Meanwhile, the men finally confirmed that there were no tricks in the cards and lifted their heads.

"Huh..."

"Do you believe it now?"

"I'm not sure what exactly you did, but yes... Hiding it well is also a skill. If this is true, you won't starve anywhere you go."

"That's been the case indeed."

"If you really want to test your luck, look for shops with a red dice painted under their signs. With more people like you around these days, many are going there hoping to make quick money."

"Red dice?"

"It's managed by a guy named Nukijo, famous for 'that' in Charloin."

When mentioning 'that,' the speaker gestured with clenched fists shaking left and right. It was a sign used to collectively describe underground groups involved in all sorts of unsavory activities.

"Hmm. I'm most curious about what kind of games they play there. Won't you tell me?"

"We don't know much about that. We've heard that some betting games are popular lately."

"Betting, huh."

"It won't be hard to find. Those guys are always lurking around here. Maybe they're even watching this game now and will approach you. I saw people like you playing games with them nearby and then following them not long ago."

After saying this, the men, feeling the game's excitement had dwindled, packed up the cards and left. Yuder, looking at the empty glasses left behind, spoke.

"The name Nukijo. It sounds familiar."

"Yeah? What about him?"

"If I remember correctly... In the previous game, he was the owner of the largest fighting arena in the South."

At that time, there were numerous fighting arenas in the South, but the Nukijo Arena was the largest. Nobles watched Awakeners and monsters fight there, betting money while drinking alcohol laced with drugs. An Awakener with the ability to entertain with various powers was nothing less than a top betting commodity.

On the lower floors, below the nobles, non-Awakeners were often forced to fight Awakeners for entertainment, in gambling fights targeting those of lower status. Those who fought there were usually heavily in debt, risking their lives.

If they lost, they were drugged, dismembered, and fed to beasts, all while onlookers laughed and enjoyed their drinks.

The orchestrator of that dreadful hell was the operator himself.

At that point in time, the fighting arena probably hadn't developed as extensively as in his previous life. However, the existence of such an establishment was evident from the attempted human trafficking by the Tain Duke's family seen in the West and through Ershi. Yuder believed that coming here would definitely lead to catching a tail.

'Had I failed to stop the human trafficking attempt by Tain Duke and Baron Willhem back then, they probably wouldn't be here now, trying to recruit people coming to join the Cavalry.'

Fresh blood is always needed in betting fights.

Since they couldn't obtain this blood from the West, Yuder figured they must be quite desperate by now.

And it seemed his conjecture was not wrong.

"It's good then. We just need to look for the places marked with red dice."

"Yes. Thanks to the Commander choosing the right people."

"If people are already sitting around playing card games before it's even time for dinner, it's obvious. Though they pretended otherwise, those guys are likely part of Nukijo's gang or somewhat connected. But..."

Kishiar, who had been smoothly continuing the conversation, suddenly paused, drawing out the silence.

'Has something gone wrong?'

Yuder quickly scanned the surroundings, preparing to unleash his power if needed.

"Isn't it risky to use such a title for addressing me here where someone might hear? It might also be dangerous to use it at our next destination. What do you think?"

"..."

Realizing that Kishiar's concern was completely different from what he had anticipated, Yuder relaxed his tensed muscles somewhat disappointedly.

'It's a valid point, though...'

"That is true. Shall we avoid using titles then? Or perhaps I could pretend to be a knight escort like Sir Zuckerman..."

"No. I absolutely do not want to be addressed as 'my lord'."

Kishiar shook his head, resting his chin on his hand.

"Isn't there something else?"

"...Something else, you say."

"Yes. There are various titles and forms of address in the world, after all."

Chapter 655

"Yes. There are various titles and forms of address in the world, after all."

Yuder fell silent, pondering the diverse titles. Kishiar, counting on his fingers, continued slowly, "Status, age, gender, name, nickname, endearment, relationship — all can serve as titles. Among these, which would be best for us to use, so we can approach the fighting arena without arousing suspicion, pretending to be Awakeners who have come for the Cavalry?"

"I'm not sure... I'll follow whichever you decide is best," Yuder replied, indifferent. After all, it was just a temporary measure to deceive others while investigating the fighting arena. The specific title wasn't important.

But for Kishiar, it seemed to matter more.

With a sly smile, the man tilted his head, lowering his voice to a whisper, "Let's consider some options. We should exclude status and perhaps gender too. Age, hmm... Would it mean I have to call you 'big brother,' or the other way around?"

Yuder felt a shiver run down his spine at the thought. It was one thing to call Enon 'big brother,' but the idea of Kishiar addressing him that way felt unsettling, not just because of their mismatched appearances.

"Surprising. I never thought of it, but the idea gives me goosebumps as soon as I heard it."

Kishiar burst into laughter, seeing Yuder's furrowed brow, "Then what remains are names and relationships."

Kishiar's eyes narrowed into a crescent, "Actually, you once called me by my name in a dream... Do you remember?"

"Did I? When was that... Ah."

Yuder recalled a dream right after his heat period ended, about a past life ceremony. After the dream Kishiar disappeared, Yuder had spoken his name.

Kishiar La Orr.

It was a name he often thought of but rarely spoke aloud.

"Are you referring to that time after the heat period?"

"Yes. I was thrilled then. In a good way."

To Yuder, calling Kishiar by his name felt more like answering a question than a deliberate choice. He hadn't pondered it deeply, but it seemed to have left a significant impression on Kishiar.

"Did you ever call me that in the previous game?"

"No, back then..."

Yuder recalled with some discomfort his past life memories. His way of addressing Kishiar had been inconsistent. Initially, 'Commander' sufficed, but after Yuder became the Commander, he

struggled to call him 'Duke.' His annoyance and anger at Kishiar's corrections were palpable, often resorting to simply 'you.'

'I can't say I wasn't tempted to pass it off as imperial defamation.'

However, Kishiar seemed indifferent to any title other than 'Commander.' Yuder's small acts of rebellion were effortlessly dismissed.

After Kishiar's death, there was no need to be cautious, so Yuder freely used his name as he pleased.

Although Kishiar La Orr's death, the last of the imperial lineage, was quietly overlooked, he had died accused of treason.

A traitor is denied both status and honor.

He had lived almost erasing the fact that Kishiar was once his superior from his mind, thus feeling no need to address him with due respect.

The influence of this mindset lingered, for inwardly, he still casually referred to Kishiar by name, though he knew it wasn't proper.

But what did it matter? No one could know how he referred to someone in his mind.

"...I have never called you by name. I addressed you as 'Commander' or 'Duke'..."

"And?"

Perhaps sensing there was more, Kishiar prodded Yuder, who took too long to reply. Sighing, Yuder admitted, "When I was angry, I sometimes called you 'you.' You didn't seem to mind much, but it was inappropriate nonetheless."

"Good heavens."

"..."

"How thrilling. Let's go with that."

"Are you serious?"

Yuder couldn't help but retort.

"Would you prefer your esteemed name? What if someone recognizes it?"

"Of course, my real name is out of the question."

Kishiar chuckled mischievously.

"My parents had a name they used when I sneaked out incognito."

This was new to Yuder, who blinked and asked, "Did you have a nickname?"

Imperial family members didn't create nicknames. Their names had to be perfect in themselves. While they could have formal titles like 'The Crimson Prince' or 'The Emperor of Libra,' commoner-like endearments were unheard of.

"It's more of a childhood name used only by my parents. Even my brother, His Majesty, doesn't use it now. It wasn't recorded anywhere, given where I was born."

Kishiar looked somewhat nostalgic as he spoke.

"My mother created it. She boldly disregarded the useless parts of palace traditions and etiquette, insisting on doing what she deemed necessary, despite opposition. This was one of those things."

"...What was your nickname?"

"Just four letters, but too long for a child to understand. She said, despite opposition, it's good for a child to have a lovingly given name."

Yuder knew little about the previous Empress. But this story seemed very much like Kishiar.

"She was remarkable."

"Indeed. I think so too."

Kishiar then revealed the name.

"Akit."

"..."

"And shortened to, Kit."

Yuder repeated the name, feeling strangely unfamiliar yet intrigued.

"By the way, His Majesty's childhood name was Lukel. Mother used to call him 'Lu-' for a long time. Can you guess how it was derived?"

"...I see."

Yuder found himself privy to the Emperor's secret childhood name, adorable and reminiscent of a cute child. He thought it best to keep this knowledge from Emperor Keilusa.

"What about you? Any other names used when you lived with your grandfather?"

"None. My name is short enough."

Yuder answered, then for the first time in a long while, reminisced about his childhood. A nearly forgotten memory faintly surfaced.

"Um... when I returned from playing in the mountains, all dirty... No, never mind."

"Starting to say something and then denying it only makes the listener unbearably curious. Are you torturing me intentionally?"

Yuder exhaled a sigh before speaking again.

"...He used to say that a mud-caked puppy can't enter the house, so go wash up first. He said that quite often."

"A mud-caked puppy..." Kishiar murmured, savoring the phrase, and then smiled. "That's really adorable. It's clear he cherished and raised you well."

His gaze was so warm it almost made one squirm. Yuder, avoiding his eyes, muttered, "Yes, well... He was a good man. But I know it's an inappropriate title for me."

"Not at all. I could call you that even now. After all, calling you only 'Yuder' might alert others that you are the renowned Yuder Aile, so perhaps I should take this opportunity to call you 'puppy'?"

Yuder knew Kishiar often saw him in a favorable light, but this was crossing a line. Even as a half-joke, it was too much. Yuder shook his head firmly. "Don't be ridiculous. If necessary, there are other names."

"Yudrain?"

Yuder hesitated slightly, then nodded.

"Yes."

The shock he once felt when Kishiar used that name was gone now. He realized that clearly in this moment.

A name Kishiar La Orr had given him, known to no one in this world. It was perfect as a pseudonym.

"That's sufficient."

Yuder stood up.

"Please get up, Mr. Akit. There's much to do before dinner."

"No, just Akit. And ease up on the formal speech; it creates a sense of distance. Let's address each other as just the name."

"Now, shall we try it again?" Kishiar, rising to follow, prompted him.

Yuder took a breath, looked directly into Kishiar's hidden red eyes, and spoke.

"...Yes, Akit. Are we done? Let's go."

A smile blossomed on Kishiar's face. Despite his disguise, his captivating smile drew covert glances from nearby people.

"Good. Hearing you call me that feels like possessing the whole world."

Kishiar extended his hand. Yuder hesitated briefly before taking it.

"Perhaps one day you'll call me by my real name again. But for now, this is enough."

Chapter 656

Beneath its sign, adorned with red dice, the tavern named "Black Orca" was quite renowned in the vicinity.

The red dice symbolized the ownership of the Nukijo gang, who proudly claimed dominion over the nights in Charloin, the largest trading city in the south. The Nukijo's reputation was so formidable that even knights and soldiers tasked with maintaining order in Charloin would turn a blind eye to any incident under the sign of the red dice.

Among these establishments, the Black Orca had risen in fame over the past few years by providing the newest form of entertainment – a direct and successful venture into the world of 'nightlife.'

This was the 'Random Combat Gambling.'

"It's truly amusing. Contestants, strangers to each other, are randomly chosen and sent to the arena. Have you ever seen a child struggling against an adult, or a burly man weeping as he runs from one even larger? It's hilarious. The randomness makes it all possible. We draw numbered beads from a jar."

"Hmm."

'Mustache Jack,' the doorman of the Black Orca, watched with disinterest as the barrel manager enthusiastically explained the random combat gambling to the new guests.

'Today brings new fish to the net,' the doorman thought.

The rules of the random combat gambling were simple: anyone could participate, and there were no complex rules to follow. The only objective was to win against whoever the opponent might be, earning money based on the number of victories.

"The prize starts at a minimum of one bronze coin per win. The highest tier? Don't be shocked. Just one win earns you a gold coin! One! Win ten times, and that's ten gold coins!"

In the lower tiers, where the rewards were meager, fights often involved children or the weak, easily winning with a single punch. Although these matches lacked the thrill of a tightly contested battle, they were amusing in their own right, with inexperienced fighters clumsily brawling, providing sufficient excitement and laughter.

However, the atmosphere in the arena where one could earn a gold coin was entirely different. It was said that each match in this tier often ended with a corpse, underlining its perilous nature.

One might be lucky and face a scrawny child, driven by desperation for money, and win easily. But misfortune could also bring an encounter with a creature or monster far stronger and larger than any human, leading to a swift and gruesome end.

Any weapon was permissible, or none at all.

There were no cowardly tactics in this place. Whether throwing dirt in an opponent's eyes, striking a vital spot, or feigning defeat only to suddenly rise and stab an overconfident foe, victory was all that mattered.

Thus, the number of long-term participants in the fighting, known as 'bet horses,' was exceedingly low. But this was of no concern. The lure of easy money was not unique to the empire alone.

The advantage of a maritime trading city was the constant presence of foreigners who arrived by ship, always filling the city.

Every day brought new participants to the fights, ensuring that the gamblers placing their bets always had fresh excitement and opportunities to wager.

'But these days, simply winning in random combat isn't enough to make money. The newer arena downstairs is far more interesting.'

As the doorman was lost in his own thoughts, a newcomer, seemingly aware of his musings, inquired, "I heard there's something more intriguing than simple random combat here. Is that not the case?"

The barrel manager, startled by the question, quickly scanned the surroundings and then leaned in to whisper to the guests, "How did you come to know of it? Who told you?"

"It was at the Braddock Inn... I believe that was its name? Anyway, some folks there mentioned it while we were playing cards."

The first guest, whose features were somewhat indistinct, chuckled in response. His companion, shrouded in a black hood, remained silent. The doorman suspected this silent figure to be either a particularly sinister character or a noble in disguise.

'He looks young, but he's hiding his face, and his posture has an air of nobility... I've seen plenty like him. Perhaps the large companion is his servant?'

"Ah, Braddock. I see. You've come to the right place," the manager said, relaxing a bit with a knowing smile.

"Indeed. Simple random combat is just an old-fashioned game from years past. The hottest game nowadays? It's 'that one' where creatures more monstrous than monsters fiercely battle and jostle, drenching the floor in blood as spectators place their bets."

A bright smile, incongruous with his cruel words, spread across the manager's face, mirrored by a similar smirk from the doorman.

'Whoever thought this up is a genius at finding ways to make money.'

Two years ago, when the Awakeners first appeared and the initial chaos had subsided, the Nukijo gang began to realize the impact these new beings could have on their random combat fights.

The abilities of the Awakened were flashy and conspicuous. Whether spewing fire or water, or sprouting grotesque horns, their participation in the fights caused the number of gamblers and spectators to surge beyond comparison.

Naturally, creating a new combat arena exclusively for the Awakeners in the basement was the next logical step.

'A lot of effort went into it. Magic spells to prevent destruction, expensive furniture to accommodate the esteemed guests...'

And the new venture was a hit.

Even nobles, eager to maintain appearances, heard the rumors and came, discreetly masked. This was a thrilling and novel form of fighting, unlike any betting game before.

Such was its success that other gangs running similar random combat arenas began seeking out Awakeners to participate in their own events.

Gradually, finding Awakeners for these fights became more challenging. Nukijo, the head of the gang, using his connections, began importing Awakeners regularly from the west about a year ago.

It was a bold decision, made in the belief that this venture would become the gang's primary source of income.

"However, not just anyone can enter and watch like in the first-floor arena. Unfortunately, one needs specific qualifications to participate."

"Qualifications?"

The hooded companion, speaking for the first time, asked with a chilling tone that was as ominous as his silence had been.

The manager, sharing a similar sentiment with the doorman, flinched for a moment before reflexively smiling and was about to speak when the door inside burst open. A group of young men, with faces betraying their naivety, spilled out, accompanied by Regina, one of the managers of the second basement-level fighting arena.

"Is the registration for participants over now?"

"Yes, it is. Come back later with your belongings, please."

"Understood."

"We're really looking forward to having such young and capable individuals join us. See you later."

As Regina bid them farewell with a smile, the young men's faces flushed with embarrassment.

"Ah, yes, of course."

The doorman already knew who they were. These were the Awakeners, who, like the first and second guests present, had been lured by other gangs to this place a few hours earlier.

'Were they the ones who said they came to apply for the Cavalry recruitment? I believe they passed the first round of tests, but well, that's all over now. They've come here to dig their own graves. I wonder if they'll even make it to the second round.'

The Black Orca had seen a fair share of such naive souls lately. The doorman secretly savored a mischievous pleasure, imagining how their faces would change in a few hours, having come here with light hearts, hoping to gather travel expenses.

So engrossed was he in this thought that he failed to notice the hooded second guest watching these newcomers intently.

'What would the Cavalry say about those who volunteered but deserted midway?'

As far as they knew, many of the Awakeners who came to join the Cavalry deserted for various reasons: failing the first test, passing but having sudden family emergencies, finding the atmosphere of the Cavalry different from their expectations, encountering an enemy they disliked... the reasons were diverse.

Once they deserted, the Cavalry had no more to do with them. Busy with the influx of applicants, the Cavalry focused on their work while the Nukijo gang lured the wandering Awakeners into participating in their fights.

Those who came of their own volition and later cried foul found it too late to change their minds. The gang cunningly held them with hidden clauses in contracts and oaths, using them in the second basement-level arena until they were of no more use.

'These sturdy ones should last a while.'

He had been quite anxious due to a mishap where participants from the west failed to arrive. Thankfully, fortune favored them. The establishment of the Cavalry branch in the city and their recruitment had been a stroke of luck for the Nukijo gang.

'They probably don't know what they're getting into.'

As the doorman watched the young Awakeners leave the tavern, smiling silently to himself, the first and second guests whispered to each other.

Then, the first guest smiled and began to speak.

"Hmm. It seems that tonight is the night for that 'more interesting fight', isn't it?"

"No, it's tomorrow. It's not held every day; we need time to prepare."

"What were the conditions to participate again? I seem to have missed your answer earlier."

"Ah. If you wish to bet and watch, you must first pay an entrance fee. It's about five silver coins, and you need to take an oath to enter. It's for the safety of our guests, you could say. You can choose not to take the oath, but keep in mind that the entrance fee will be much higher then."

"I see."

The first guest nodded his head.

Chapter 657

"What will you do then? Will you pay the entry fee now, or...?"

"It seems you're under some misconception," retorted the second guest in an icy tone.

"We never said we wanted to participate 'by placing bets'."

"Excuse me?"

The perplexed manager echoed, his eyes blinking in realization.

"So, you're not here to place bets, but... you two wish to participate directly?"

"Yes."

"Excuse me, but... you're Awakeners, aren't you? Both of you?"

The manager's tone shifted, as did that of the doorman who had been idly standing guard. Both were taken aback upon realizing these two were not the usual gamblers, but the exact opposite.

"Does it not appear so?"

It hadn't appeared so at all! The first guest might have been questionable, but the second guest was surely of noble descent – or so they had thought. Clearly, their judgment was flawed.

The manager, sharing the doorman's incredulity, asked with a disbelieving gaze, "Then, perhaps, you've come to apply for the Cavalry... Both of you?"

Instead of a verbal response, the first guest simply smiled, a tacit affirmation.

"We missed the chance to explain when you started elaborating upon our arrival."

"Ah..."

Indeed, these two had shown none of the hesitation or eagerness typical of first-time visitors seeking profit. It had seemed only natural to mistake them for gamblers.

The astounded manager scrutinized them anew, not as guests to be served, but as potential merchandise to be appraised.

"You both seem physically fit... and not in any apparent hurry. Why the interest in participating?"

"That's your opinion, not ours," the second guest replied coolly, as the first guest gently patted his shoulder in a calming gesture and added, "We're just poor souls without a place to stay tonight. Usually, we make do with earnings from games, but hearing this place is quite lucrative, we decided to try our luck. No other reason. Do we need one?"

"No, not at all..."

Although surprised, the manager couldn't just let potential earnings slip away.

He stood up and motioned them to follow. "Come with me."

They headed towards a door at the back of the tavern, previously exited by naive young Awakeners. Beyond it lay a well-decorated corridor and a desk with contracts and oaths for participants.

"If you want to earn money by fighting, you'll need to sign these. But first, show us proof of your abilities."

"I'll go first..."

"No, let me," the second guest interjected, stepping ahead of the first guest.

"There's no need for that. I should go first."

"It's potentially dangerous. It's only right that I go first."

Their insistence on being first was frustrating to witness. The men's bickering was unbearably irksome. The manager, pressing down his irritation with patience, thought, 'Does it matter who goes first? Just do it quickly! Weren't you eager to participate, you fools?'

Fortunately for him, the conclusion came swiftly, thanks to the second guest's threatening words, spoken with a face so cold it seemed impervious to even the tip of a blade.

"Remember, Akit, I've already conceded enough by allowing us to join together. I could easily have participated alone."

The first guest, who had initially widened his eyes in surprise, grinned helplessly and stepped back.

"Really... You're so stubborn. You know too well what I'm weak against."

Despite his words, the smile on his face suggested he was quite pleased.

'Is he actually happy to be threatened by someone smaller than him? Is he mad?'

Initially, the manager had thought they were just ordinary companions. But observing their interaction, he began to suspect otherwise. Had they not both been men, he might have mistaken them for a couple in a deep, loving relationship.

'...Wait. If these two are really Awakeners... Could it be?'

The manager recalled recent rumors that had drifted south on the wind.

'Duke Peletta, the Commander of the Cavalry, took a male member of the Cavalry who had made great achievements in the West as his companion and danced with him at a party... Even with differing second genders, it is said that even the Emperor turned a blind eye...'

The impact of that rumor was profound. Even the Nukijo gang, who ran the Awakener fighting rings, had been unaware of such details about Awakeners until then.

The manager suddenly saw the first and second guests in a different light.

'If these two are in that kind of relationship and have come here together, does that make sense of their strange and awkward behavior?'

As he pondered this, the second guest removed the hood he had been wearing. With the shabby cloth gone from his face, his black hair and pale complexion were revealed, looking neater than expected. The manager judged his speculation to be correct.

'Young and seemingly well-kept, yet they lack even tonight's lodging. How recklessly they must have lived.'

"Where do I sign?"

"Ah, but first. If you're truly an Awakener, you need to show proof. We need to see your abilities to make a decision."

The prize for winning in the Awakener fighting ring was not just one, but five gold coins per victory. Though he had never seen anyone leave with the money intact, confirmation was mandatory.

'Sometimes fools pretend to be Awakeners, telling implausible lies to try for the money.'

the second guest nodded, pulled his hood back on, and then, without any preparatory movements, conjured a massive flame right in front of the manager's face.

"Whoa!"

Startled, the manager fell backward as the flame quickly vanished.

"What are you doing?! You almost burned my face off!"

"Apologies. It's a bit hard to control," the second guest said with an expressionless face, his apology seeming far from sincere. The manager, fuming, was about to protest but swallowed his anger instead. He turned to the first guest, his eyes filled with increased wariness.

"...And you?"

"Don't worry. My ability is more tame than his."

After saying this, the first guest picked up a quill from the desk and threw it into the air like a dart. The quill, which had been heading towards the wall, suddenly stopped mid-air as if by magic.

The quill quivered, then spun around and flew back into the hands of the one who had thrown it. The manager watched this spectacle, swallowing hard.

He marveled at their abilities: one could instantly conjure and extinguish a massive flame, while the other manipulated objects. Among all the Awakeners who had visited thus far, few possessed such high-level skills.

The excitement of returning to his role as an operator of the gambling ring surged through him.

"Excellent. You may sign right away."

"I can't write, so how should I do it?"

"Don't worry. I'll write your names for you. You just need to dip your finger in ink and press it on the paper. So, your names are...?"

"Akit. And the one who came with me is... Yudrain."

The first guest, announcing the name 'Yudrain', smirked at the second guest, who showed no reaction. Observing this one-sided amusement, it was clear that Akit, a man, was utterly infatuated, driven mad by the allure of another man even though they had different second genders.

After completing the oath, the manager told them to wait and took the documents downstairs. In the inner area of the second floor, busily preparing for tomorrow's matches, was their leader, Nukijo.

"Hey, boss! We've got some useful newcomers."

"Hmm? What about them?"

After reading the papers handed to him and listening to the explanation, a satisfied smile crept across Nukijo's face.

"Such abilities are rare. We can put them in the arena tomorrow. They said they have nowhere to stay tonight, so let's provide lodging here."

"Is that wise? The current lodgers are in a bit of a rough state..."

"Don't be foolish. If we let them get away, it's us who will be in trouble. If the two guys really have different second genders, one must be an Omega, right?"

Nukijo's eyes gleamed with a devious light.

"We should use this to our advantage in our promotions."

Chapter 658

"We should use this to our advantage in our promotions."

The world was full of tough guys with strong fists and even stronger guts. But Nukijo, who ruled the nights of Charloin, was a different breed; his mind worked swiftly, especially when it came to nefarious deeds. Upon learning that the new sources of income might be a pair of Alpha and Omega Awakeners, Nukijo immediately concocted an even more sensational and lucrative scheme.

"First, pretend to treat them well and lodge them in the quarters. Then, slip them sleeping pills. While they sleep, separate the two and perform a physical examination. Tomorrow, we'll watch them fight. If they're skilled, we'll get them addicted and exploit them. If not, we'll offer them to our special grade clients for a spectacle of two Awakeners with different second genders feasting upon each other."

"Incredible. That's something even I'd like to see. People will bring loads of money just to watch."

The manager lavished praise on Nukijo, admiring his cunning brain in such matters. It was human nature to enjoy compliments, and Nukijo's mood soared even higher.

"Exactly. I've been thinking the demand for Awakeners with second genders must have increased lately because of Duke Peletta. Honestly, I'm curious how a man who can bear children is structured. The high and mighty are no different from the rest."

However, for a non-Awakener, it was difficult to discern if someone was an Awakener with a second gender unless they revealed it themselves. For Nukijo, the pair of Awakeners who had willingly shown up was nothing short of a golden opportunity.

"This is the perfect chance to expand the arena. Make sure to handle it well."

"Understood."

"Actually, maybe I should take care of it myself. Where are they now?"

Fortunately for Nukijo, the two naïve participants were still on the first underground level. The duo looked slightly startled when the rugged-faced Nukijo appeared, but they quickly relaxed as he smiled and extended his hospitality.

"Participants with as much potential as you are personally managed by us. I hear you have nowhere to stay tonight. Why not stay here? We happen to have some rooms available."

Of course, those rooms were only available because their previous occupants had met their demise. Naturally, neither the manager nor Nukijo mentioned this.

"Hmm, this is rather sudden and a bit inconvenient," remarked the first guest, who had expected to be immediately taken advantage of when offered shelter. "While I do lack a place to stay, I originally intended to seek assistance elsewhere."

Contrary to expectations, this individual, who was presumed to be an easy target, stroked his chin thoughtfully and responded with a hint of hesitation.

'Look at this. What would you have done if I hadn't come?'

Nukijo, casting a reproachful glance at the manager, spoke with an unexpectedly amiable tone.

"Is that so? Well, if that's the case, I must say it can't be helped. But I'd like to mention that staying with us means free meals. It's dinner time now, how about joining us?"

"Dinner?"

"I think it's a good proposal, considering we'll soon be working together. It's a chance to learn more about each other. While there's no 'special combat' tonight, regular fights are scheduled. You might enjoy watching those too."

"Hmm, I was indeed curious about that."

The first guest slightly tilted his head, intriguingly simple in appearance yet possessing an ability to provoke interest. Nukijo, annoyed by the individual's indecisive behavior, soon composed himself, thinking of the money to be extracted from them.

"Indeed, it's all about mood. With the authority of the owner, I will allow you to see it from a good position. Sit back, relax, and watch those easy-money chasers."

The ordinary brawl they were about to witness was merely bait. Some of their gang members, who looked ordinary on the outside, were slated to stir things up in the ring.

Such an opportunity was rare. Looking impressed, the first and second guests exchanged glances. After a moment, the second guest nodded slowly in agreement.

"Good."

"Yes, well thought out."

Nukijo chuckled heartily as he ascended for a meal with them, not forgetting to signal the manager to drug the food and drink for the two guests.

During the meal, Nukijo gleaned more information about them.

The first and second guests, it turned out, were indeed Awakeners with second genders, originally from the central region but had traveled to Charloin upon hearing of the Cavalry recruitment.

Nukijo filtered this information through his personal sieve of interpretation.

'Travel, my foot. They must have fled home after Awakening, roaming around as mercenaries. When out of money, they'd gamble to earn more, eventually drifting here. Typical riffraff.'

These discarded pieces, unclaimed by anyone, were now Nukijo's to pick up, polish, and profit from substantially.

Nukijo smiled in amusement.

However, after the meal and watching the bait fight, an unexpected problem arose.

'Why aren't they collapsing? Shouldn't they at least appear drowsy by now?'

He had definitely mixed the drug into their meals and drinks, enough to knock out not just ordinary people but even Awakeners, rendering them unconscious to the extent of not noticing if their limbs were severed.

Yet, the guests seemed unaffected. Even after repeatedly feeding them more drugged drinks, they remained lively.

'What are these guys made of?'

When the second guest, having eaten most of the first guest's portion too, refused any more drinks, the manager beside Nukijo couldn't hide his astonishment and asked.

"Aren't you... sleepy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, with all the eating, drinking, and watching the fight, one would normally start feeling tired around now..."

As the manager fumbled and answered, the two guests faced each other. After a moment, the first guest let out a sound, "Aha..."

"I'm sorry for worrying so much without realizing it."

"...Huh?"

"Actually, I was really sleepy but was holding it in. You too, right?"

"...Yes, well. It seems so."

Shortly thereafter, the two guests leaned on each other's shoulders and closed their eyes in harmony. It seemed absurd, as if they were feigning sleep, but even when their cheeks were softly tapped and they were toppled over, they did not wake. Confirming that they would not wake no matter what, Nukijo finally unleashed the frustration he had been holding back.

"Damn it! How much did the missing ingredients cost today?"

"When I checked the liquor storeroom and kitchen earlier, it seemed like three days' worth."

"Blast! That pig. If he doesn't do his share, I'll tie him up in front of the guests and force-feed him feed to see how much he can take, just to get every penny back."

Even in the midst of this, Nukijo's scheming for new ways to make money was indeed characteristic of him.

Shortly after, under Nukijo's orders, some men entered and supported the two guests, leading them to the basement. There, sturdy 'quarters' were built, so solid that even the Awakeners could not easily escape.

The gang, having forcefully ushered the two guests into two separate rooms, rummaged through their clothing and bodies to check their possessions. Though it was unclear if they arrived with any luggage, the items worn by the two captives appeared too worn and old to be of any value.

"The bracelet full of scratches and the rusted copper ring the brown-haired one was wearing were too stubborn to remove, so we left them. As for the black-haired one, we only took his sword. There wasn't much else of value."

Upon inspecting the sword brought to him, Nukijo casually glanced at its plain, pitch-black sheath and cast it aside.

"What use does a fire-wielder have for a sword? Seems like some young lad got carried away and stuck a cheap ruby in there. We'll just pluck that out and sell it later."

After ensuring the captives' sleeping quarters were securely locked, the group ascended with a sense of relief, not forgetting to kick the doors of other rooms where cries, akin to those of a beast in distress, emanated, to quiet them down.

Little did they know, just a few minutes later, the two captives they thought securely locked away and asleep, opened their eyes almost as if on cue, a scenario beyond their wildest imaginations.

"Such a lackluster start. There's not a single fresh idea," Yuder criticized the unimaginative Nukijo's gang coldly as he awoke in his bed. Indeed, the operational methods of this fledgling fighting business involving Awakeners seemed much more crude and on a smaller scale compared to what Yuder remembered from his past life.

Yet, their malicious intent seemed no less significant, a realization that was not without its insights.

Yuder stretched his limbs and mentally organized the structure and personnel of the place, which he had observed while eating and watching the fights.

His and Kishiar's visit to the 'Black Orca' tavern was after touring several shops marked with red dice. During their rounds, they gathered information about the general random combat gambling spread across Charloin and the South, as well as the Awakeners fighting rings that had started appearing about a year ago.

Random combat gambling had been systematically established in dozens of locations for a few years, but places actively involving Awakeners were still few. Among them, the 'Black Orca' was the largest and the first in Charloin to create a separate ring for awakened fighters.

Hence, Yuder surmised this place had the highest probability of forcibly involving Awakeners.

‘Which means, if I burn this place down, it could mean a swift eradication within my reach.’

Destruction was easy, but recklessly demolishing it would make it difficult to catch all at once the tails of the nobles or others who visited this place and conspired in various crimes. Therefore, they decided to witness the detailed situation of the Awakener fighting ring with their own eyes.

The sight of the newly tricked recruits of the Cavalry, infuriatingly familiar, was an added bonus.

"If my memory serves, those fellows belonged to the Star of Nagran, the ones I saw earlier today..."

Chapter 659

"If my memory serves, those fellows belonged to the Star of Nagran, the ones I saw earlier today..."

These people had left their homes with difficulty and joined the Cavalry, only to fall prey to such schemes within a day. Judging by their attitudes, filled more with shame and awkwardness than with dark greed, it was clear they had truly believed this place was not as bad as it seemed.

Yuder thought, ‘They don't know the difference between a regular random fight and one specifically for awakened fighters.’

Though frustrated, Yuder realized he needed to act quickly before they became prey in the awakened fighters' arena.

The contracts and oaths created by the Nukijo gang, as well as the drugs they were fed, posed no real constraint to Yuder. The oaths weren't even properly certified. Thanks to Kishiar, who had intervened cleverly, allowing him to pretend not to understand the written word and avoiding direct signing, the binding power of the oaths was almost imperceptible.

'Of course, to those who don't understand oaths, it could still be threatening... but that's not the case for me,' Yuder reflected.

He had seen that the oath, for the most part, only compelled the participants to join the fights regardless of the situation, along with subtly mixed clauses to prevent easy escape.

In essence, for those like Yuder, who had no intention of running away and instead planned to destroy the system from within, these oaths were of little concern.

'Idiots. It's evident how easily they've been operating until now.'

The failure of those responsible for maintaining public order led to such situations. Yuder considered them all worth eliminating.

As Yuder surveyed the room, he counted the debts he would settle when he swept these scoundrels away.

'I can overlook the drugs mixed in my food and drink, but the one who hit Kishiar's face must pay back tenfold. If there are any Awakeners detained here who came for Cavalry recruitment, I will exact a further price for each... Ah, and there's a part to show to Ershi too.'

He remembered Ershi, the vengeful soul he had met in the west. She was currently imprisoned and laboring quietly. A year ago, she had narrowly escaped human trafficking and ended up in the Star of Nagran.

Her descent into vengeance was fueled by the survival of only herself, despite having a family who were also kidnapped. Her deep anger had abated only when her powers surged to the point of self-destruction.

This was reaffirmed through information gathered from several Awakeners from the Star of Nagran, including Robel, during the process of capturing and imprisoning Ershi.

To Ershi, who had screamed at Kishiar, questioning what they had done when others like her needed salvation, Kishiar had calmly replied, "I will help you see clearly again who to blame, who to avenge, and what consequences your own actions have wrought."

Since then, Ershi had been helping rebuild Tainu, atoning for the indiscriminate killings she had caused.

Now, it was time to show both Ershi and the Cavalry where she had been taken a year ago, and who truly deserved punishment.

As Yuder's gaze sharpened, a faint tapping sound suddenly echoed from above. Looking up, he saw a section of the seemingly empty ceiling retracted upwards, revealing a hidden space. From there, a voice rang out.

"Oh my, the owner of the room is still awake. Would you scold this rude night visitor who desired to see your face at this late hour?"

The voice was grandiose and embarrassingly formal, yet playful and smooth, like something out of a high-society gathering. In an instant, all thoughts cleared from Yuder's mind.

Yuder looked up at the dark void in silence, as if waiting for a response, then finally spoke.

"Come down, then."

"Since I have your permission, I shall descend."

Moments later, Kishiar leaped down from the gap. The tall, imposing man landed silently beside Yuder, making the room seem suddenly smaller.

Kishiar greeted him with a mischievous smile.

"I waited for when you might come, then decided to come myself. Waiting has its charms, but sometimes it's better to seek out what you desire."

Kishiar was indeed larger than life and never short of words.

Yuder, instead of pointing this out, exhaled softly and asked, "Was your journey here uncomfortable?"

"Not in the slightest. The ceiling had a protective magic circle, creating quite a spacious area. Plus, moving from the next room was easy."

"That's good to hear."

"I took the liberty of disabling that magic circle on my way here."

Had the Nukijo gang heard this, they would have screamed in horror at the destruction of their expensive magic circle, but Yuder was the only one present.

"That's also good. Are you alright from the drug you took earlier?"

"Absolutely fine. I haven't cultivated such a weak tolerance to poison. Besides, you ate most of it for me, so perhaps you should be more concerned about yourself."

"You already know that won't affect me."

Yuder had suspected something was amiss when Nukijo kept offering drinks. He had cunningly eaten most of Kishiar's food in his stead. It had taken time to confirm that the intended effect was sleep, as there were many possibilities for tampering.

'I thought it would be more likely a stimulant or relaxant, but a sleeping drug... A rather mundane approach in retrospect.'

For Yuder, food was usually consumed without much thought to the quantity. This was one of the rare occasions he had eaten so much, deliberately. He remembered Nukijo's barely concealed frustration at the sight of him devouring the food and drinks, seemingly regretting the cost.

‘It seems I ate more eagerly just to spite that fool's dumbfounded face.’

Although he had eaten more than usual, the excess would soon be digested as he began to move and exert himself.

"But before I came here, I noticed something unusual about this place, apart from the protective magic. Have you checked it out?"

"No, what is it?"

Yuder had briefly surveyed his surroundings upon waking but had no idea what Kishiar was referring to. As Yuder shook his head, the corners of Kishiar's lips twitched upwards.

"It seems like powers don't manifest properly here. As if there's something suppressing abilities."

Suppressing abilities? Yuder immediately tried to conjure fire into the air.

But...

"...It's true."

Just like when Yuder had suffered a grave injury in the Great Sarain Forest and his abilities hadn't recovered, his powers didn't manifest properly. The flames he tried to summon flickered weakly before extinguishing. Witnessing this, Yuder's eyebrows twitched in contemplation.

"This is... Those people. They didn't just lock us up here without any thought."

"Do you have any idea why?"

"Yes. I suspect it has something to do with the abilities of someone else trapped here."

That seemed the most likely reason.

"Interesting."

"We should try to find the cause."

Yuder and Kishiar then leaped towards the still-open hole in the ceiling. This was easily achievable without relying heavily on the power of wind.

"It's quite spacious indeed."

"As I said. It's big enough to walk around."

As Kishiar had mentioned, a sizable space existed above the ceiling. It was pitch dark and bottomless, making it difficult to discern direction, but this was hardly an issue for the two of them.

Fortunately, their ability to perceive structures in the darkness remained unhindered in this situation. Yuder easily navigated through the darkness, advancing forward. From what he had briefly observed during his capture, the rooms in this place were mostly lined up in a single row, closely packed together. Listening for any signs of human presence, it wasn't long before they heard sobbing sounds.

The sounds were muffled and anguished, like a beast in rage yet restrained with a gag.

The initial intent to search for the source of their suppressed powers paused momentarily upon hearing this. Yuder turned his gaze in the direction of the weeping.

‘Is it over there?’

Taking the lead, Yuder moved towards the source of the sound, with Kishiar following. The location wasn't far from their room. Kishiar easily lifted the floor to reveal the scene below.

The sight in the room viewed from above was harrowing. A bloodied mass was tied with chains, emitting guttural sounds.

“Ugh... Ughhhh... Ughhhhh!”

It took a considerable amount of time to discern that the grotesque mass before them was indeed a person, and to identify where the face was. This was not only due to the severely disfigured state of the figure, but also because its appearance was quite different from that of an ordinary human.

Chapter 660

“Ugh... Ughhhh... Ughhhhh!”

It took a considerable amount of time to discern that the grotesque mass before them was indeed a person, and to identify where the face was. This was not only due to the severely disfigured state of the figure, but also because its appearance was quite different from that of an ordinary human.

Adorning its head were enormous antlers, while large wings protruded from its back. Its arms and legs were covered in thick, long feathers, making it difficult to discern their outline. Upon closer inspection, the face seemed to be a bizarre mix of human and beast.

Yuder, who had encountered many Awakeners with somewhat different appearances, rarely came across one with such a distinct and alien look. More precisely, it was this rarity that made this particular Awakener memorable.

'It would be harder to forget someone with such a distinct appearance.'

Kishiar, quickly noticing Yuder's subtle reaction upon recognizing the figure, silently mouthed a question.

'Is it someone you know?'

Yuder nodded slightly, yet noticeably enough for Kishiar to discern.

'Which side?'

Whether they had been allies or enemies.

Yuder pondered for a moment, gazing down at the groaning Awakener in pain. Then, he lightly wrote on the back of Kishiar's hand.

'He was once a member of the Cavalry. But he died early.'

The name of this Awakener was Elpkins. In his previous life, he had joined the Cavalry only about a year after they had dismantled several illegal fighting rings in the south. He was known for his immense strength, peculiar appearance, and even more remarkable regenerative abilities, which had garnered high expectations in the Shin Division.

However, Elpkins had a slight problem with his temperament. He would easily get overly excited over trivial matters and, once angered, would charge blindly into battle. His obsession with power was also much more intense compared to his peers.

His tendency to lash out in excessive fights, often ignoring the advice of colleagues during team activities, always kept his reputation within the Cavalry at rock bottom. There were several instances where he deliberately induced a rampage to accelerate his abilities.

'At least he knew to behave in front of me... but that was about it.'

Elpkins, increasingly unable to control his rage, met a gruesome end during a mission, unable to withstand another of his rampages. His regenerative abilities, which he had always relied on to save him from any peril, tragically failed him that time.

His death became a significant catalyst for Yuder to seriously acknowledge the dangers of an Awakener's rampage. It also contributed to the establishment of norms within the Cavalry, preventing members from recklessly inducing rampages for the sake of power.

Yuder briefly conveyed this event to Kishiar, while still looking down at Elpkins, who continued to suffer.

'I never mentioned that we met in the south in his previous life...'

Indeed, nobody would have wanted to admit being held captive in such a place. It was even less likely for the proud and fierce Elpkins.

In Yuder's memory, Elpkins had always been able to freely use his regenerative abilities, but now he lay bloodied and unable to use them, a sight that unsettled Yuder.

'The suppressive power permeating this entire underground space must be hindering his regeneration abilities...'

'Anyway, we must assess his condition.'

Yuder briefly glanced at Kishiar before leaping down from the ceiling to approach the figure. Even as he drew near, Elpkins seemed oblivious to his presence.

"Ughhhh..."

"..."

Up close, Elpkins' wounds were far more severe than they had appeared from a distance. His blood-stained wings were twisted and broken, and there wasn't a single unmarred limb. The feathers, originally white and blue, were more than half plucked out, leaving his skin tattered and torn.

Compared to these, the flattened and swollen nose and face seemed almost less severe.

However, more than the wounds themselves, Yuder's gaze was strongly drawn to the ragged piece of cloth that barely served as Elpkins' clothing. Made seemingly for the sole purpose of display rather than to cover or warm, the garment was a humiliating sight to behold.

'I had planned to demolish this place after participating in tomorrow's fight... but the thought of having to fight in such attire makes me want to hasten our plans.'

Yet, it was this tattered cloth that revealed something significant. Yuder exhaled softly upon noticing Elpkins' deep wounds trying to close, unsuccessfully fusing and then halting repeatedly. Even under the suppression of his powers, Elpkins' regenerative ability was struggling to surface, indicating its substantial strength.

He certainly wasn't someone to die helplessly in such a place.

Kishiar, who had landed beside Yuder, murmured in a low voice.

"Hmm. His condition is not good. He needs immediate treatment."

Kishiar was not one to easily show emotion, but his tone conveyed a clear message. He, too, had seen and deduced the same things as Yuder, and this evidently led to a significant accumulation of discontent towards the fighting ring.

"Fortunately, he is recovering slowly..."

"Even so, prolonging his pain is not good. Let me take over for a moment."

Kishiar, a possessor of great divine power, rarely used it outside of treating Yuder, to the extent that it was almost half-forgotten that he possessed such ability.

"Are you sure you can manage?"

"I tested earlier and found that the suppressive power here strongly restrains the power of the Awakener, but doesn't affect other powers as much. Treating him won't be a problem. However..."

Kishiar began to emit a dazzling white light from his fingertips, muttering to himself.

"Given the severity of his condition, this will use a lot of my power, so I might not be much help afterward."

That was not an issue. Even if Kishiar did nothing, Yuder could take action, and having him at his side would be more comforting. However, if Kishiar overexerted himself to the point of harming his own health, that would be a serious concern.

'I trust he won't overuse his power, but I'm still worried.'

To feel more anxious about another's well-being was unusual for Yuder, especially concerning Kishiar. It was a strange and unsettling feeling, given his usually uneventful life.

"...Be careful."

Yuder spoke briefly before stepping back. Soon, Kishiar began to earnestly channel his divine power, initiating the healing process for Elpkins.

It took a considerable amount of time before the light finally faded.

"It's done. That's all I can do for now."

Kishiar spoke thus, but Elpkins, upon the completion of the healing, appeared almost fully restored on the outside.

"The external fractures and wounds are mostly healed, but even considering his regenerative abilities, it will still take a few more days of treatment to fully recover."

Kishiar, after taking a deep breath, staggered as he stepped back. Yuder quickly supported him, noticing the man's face had turned significantly paler in just a short time.

"Are you alright?"

"It's just a misstep... but your concern is so great, it makes me want to stay like this."

"This is no time for jokes."

Hearing Yuder's cold yet worried voice, the man smiled broadly. He then leaned his head against Yuder's hair.

"Um... Of all the powers I possess, this one seems to suit me the least. Even I can't be compatible with everything."

"..."

"But isn't the sense of fulfillment after using such power undeniable? I don't want to hide and never use the power I have. If there's someone in need, it should be used."

Yuder looked up at Kishiar and, after a moment, nodded with difficulty.

"Uh...ughhh... Y-you...who are you?"

Just then, Elpkins finally opened his eyes. Regaining consciousness, he was momentarily frightened by the strangers before him, but soon his surprise turned to astonishment upon realizing his body was fully healed.

"I... I was seriously injured from today's defeat... How did this happen? Did you heal me?"

"Yes."

"How...? No one is supposed to be able to use their powers here..."

"That's a secret."

Kishiar silently smiled and placed a finger over his lips. Realizing that these strangers had indeed healed him, Elpkins did not press further on how he had been treated.

Instead, he scanned Yuder and Kishiar with a look of wary yet trembling eyes.

"...You're not part of the Nukijo gang, are you?"

"No, we're not."