

Turning 191

Chapter 191

"The upcoming new training schedule for the Cavalry."

"You can't possibly have made this...?"

Gakane read the text written on the paper, his eyes wide as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Until now, the training the Cavalry members had undergone consisted of only basic physical exercises and integrated training for each unit. Despite each individual having unique abilities, it had been difficult for anyone to train solely for their own benefit. A large number of them didn't even know how to go about it.

Now, with a rise in those who had completed general education and writing classes that took more of their time than training, and the status of the Cavalry having grown incomparably higher than before, it was the perfect time to change the training schedule.

Consequently, Yuder had spent nearly all of the previous night formulating the training schedule he had been considering for some time. He first wrote out a basic individual training schedule, built upon his experiences from his previous life. Then, he grouped together about ten individuals, regardless of their units, according to the abilities he had observed in them so far. He purposely grouped those with similar or complementary abilities in order to create relationships that could aid in individual training.

Essentially, the members would spend their day conducting personal training similar to what Yuder had done in his previous life. However, the main focus of this schedule was to provide a regular time for comrades to gather, observe, and assist each other to improve their abilities.

"I've already secured permission from the Commander."

"When did you have the time to think of all this? You've been so busy running around... And there's even an examination?"

Gakane, who had been reading the schedule with his mouth agape, paused at a certain part. It was the section that mentioned a simple ability test under the Deputy Commander's supervision once a month to assess the development of abilities and diligence.

"Do we really need this?"

"Examinations are absolutely necessary. There are many people who won't make a move without a goal."

Moreover, the accumulated exam results could serve as a great standard when selecting and promoting necessary talents for the Cavalry in the future. So it was indeed essential.

"I suppose you're right..."

As Gakane nodded and read on, other members who had been conducting physical training nearby gradually gathered behind them.

"What's this? A new training schedule?"

"Yuder made it? If we follow this, can we become as strong as him?"

"Wow. It seems similar to before, but entirely different. It's systematic, but I'm not confident if I can keep up."

"Twenty minutes of meditation right after waking up? Is it true that this helps accumulate and preserve power?"

The reactions were a mix of concern and fascination, but they were generally positive.

Yuder ascended, leaving the murmuring members behind. Less than half a day later, all the Cavalry members had read the new schedule. The members, having gained confidence while guarding the capital during the festival period, were currently striving hard, fueled by the desire to become stronger. They warmly welcomed the new systematic training plan.

"Yuder. I saw the new schedule! It's amazing. Those who are training with me will gather in the second-floor lounge after the writing class ends in the afternoon. Come over! See you there."

Kanna, who Yuder ran into while heading down for lunch, excitedly whispered and left, waving her hand. It was fortunate that she was behaving as usual, as if her earlier collapse had never happened.

Yuder headed to the lounge at the time Kanna had mentioned. The majority of those gathered had not had any personal conversations with anyone apart from Kanna and Gakane. However, such facts were no obstacle in front of their fervor for gaining strength.

"Yuder Aile is here!"

As soon as Yuder arrived, the members who had shouted loudly flocked to his side, raising their voices in a clamorous chatter.

"Yuder! They say your training skills are exceptional, right? Can you tell me how I should train?"

"I'm not sure if my training method is right. Can you watch once and give me some advice?"

"I, I also want to..."

Among them were some who hadn't shown much enthusiasm in their previous lives. Remembering the dull times when they were solely focused on their own safety while working, the sight of their younger colleagues brimming with passion felt both regrettable and heartwarming.

Yuder took his time to slowly recommend a training method suitable for each person's skill development. He had thought that at least one person might feel offended receiving advice from Yuder, a fellow member, but that was a misconception.

What had initially been a gathering of fewer than 20 people exploded uncontrollably after the rumor spread that Yuder Aile was giving training advice. Eventually, he had to attend to those who came asking, even skipping dinner.

The last day of the non-holiday holiday disappeared in the blink of an eye.

"Yuder. It seems like no more people will come. Let's get up."

Gakane, who had been by Yuder's side all day helping organize the members with his shadow clone, approached him with a tired face, looking out the window at the setting sun.

"Sorry. It seems I asked for your help today for nothing. I didn't expect this crowd..."

Kanna, who had been equally worn out by his side, apologized.

"I'm fine."

However, just as they were about to get up, the door opened again and someone poked their head in, making the prospect of returning to their lodging seem dubious again.

"Would it be possible to still receive advice?"

"Ever?"

Kanna's eyes widened at the appearance of an unexpected person. The latecomer was Ever, Deputy Commander of Shin Division.

"I didn't expect you to come, Ever."

"I've been so busy all day that I just heard about it. If it's over, I'll just go."

"Please, have a seat."

Yuder responded coolly and sat down. Here was Ever Beck, an excellent member who had developed her abilities well in her previous life, seeking advice. It struck him vividly that it was indeed 11 years prior.

"I'm glad. I won't take up much of your time."

Ever sat down in front of Yuder, taking slow breaths. Her cheeks were still red, as if she had run hastily.

"Like everyone else, I've been worrying about how to set my personal training direction. So far, I've been focusing on enhancing the abilities I already have, but I'm worried if that alone will be sufficient."

"You're already doing well enough, but if you think that's not sufficient, what do you think is missing?"

"Hmm. Well... I feel like I'm only using my power in a way that distributes it too lightly. That's the tendency. You all know my abilities, right?"

Ever lightly shook her gloved hand, revealing her exposed fingers. Her strength lay in physical power and skin strength, which might make it odd to suggest she could divide her power. However, for Yuder, who could perceive the flow of energy, it was different. The faint energy gathering at the tips of Ever's fingers in an instant was the core of the strength she could exert. So small it would be unnoticeable without intense focus, but a precisely calculated force momentarily lingered at her fingertips before dispersing again.

"I think this power is wonderful, of course. But lately, when I look at others, I sometimes think I might need an ability to make a big impact. So, I thought it would be good if I could improve that through training... My explanation is a bit strange, isn't it? I'm sorry. I'm not used to explaining things like this."

"No, it's fine."

In essence, Ever was wondering if it might be better to develop a method to use power that stands out and is flashy, like others.

'It's a common trap to fall into. The grass is always greener.'

Based on his past experiences, Yuder understood Ever's thoughts. But understanding her did not mean he wanted to support her in this line of thinking.

'There's no need to accentuate a weakness when you have a good ability.'

Yuder remembered how Ever, in her previous life, had single-handedly jumped into a horde of about 100 monsters and took them all down in an instant. It was ironic to think that the best user of

powers he had met, someone who could wield their ability with precision, had at one point considered training to go in the complete opposite direction. He almost laughed at the thought.

"I wouldn't do that, Ever," Yuder advised her in a quiet but firm tone.

"Your ability is far more amazing than those who constantly waste their energy. If I were you, I would continue as you have been, while increasing your courage and adaptability for close combat."

Ever's power was mighty, but had the disadvantage of not having the same effect on the target when used from a distance. Her ability was most effective when used in conjunction with close combat.

"So, is that so? Was I just being too greedy?"

Ever scratched her head with an awkward expression, prompting Kanna to nod.

"It's not that you're greedy, it's just that your ability is so great. Out of all the people who came today, you're the first one Yuder has spoken so highly of!"

"Really...?"

While Ever seemed genuinely happy but a little bewildered, it seemed as if she hadn't fully grasped the potential of her power. But with time, she would undoubtedly come to understand it on her own, without the need for anyone else's advice. Watching her, Yuder suddenly thought that he might be the one needing advice.

'When I think about it, what I really need now is an ability like Ever's.'

The red spots caused by the power of the Red Stone hadn't disappeared yet. He was in a situation where he couldn't freely use his power like before, and had already been thinking of finding a more delicate way to divide and use it. And what better teacher to learn from than the master of such an ability?

Someone who was born to use a very small, precise amount of power at just the right place.

"Ever."

"Yes?"

"Would you teach me how to use your power?"

"Are you joking?"

Ever, along with Gakane and Kanna, wore a surprised expression, seemingly unable to guess Yuder's reasoning. However, Yuder was serious.

"Uh... I'm not sure if I can be of help. Yuder, you're already so powerful, what could I possibly teach you?"

"It's alright. Just showing me how you use it will be enough. Is that not possible?"

"It's not that it's impossible..."

That was enough for him. Yuder had managed to secure a promise to meet her during the morning free training time, and he was as satisfied as a well-fed beast. It was, without doubt, the greatest harvest he'd gained from this holiday.

Afterward, Ever left with Kanna, looking somewhat flustered. Gakane offered to help Yuder finish the cleanup, but Yuder insisted he go ahead, as he seemed quite tired.

The recreation room was left with only a few pieces of litter and chairs strewn about, as if to reflect the noisy bustle of the day. Yuder picked up the trash and moved the chairs back to their original positions. As he pushed the last remaining chair towards the table and turned around, a voice echoed from the direction of the door without warning.

"I didn't tell you to rest just so you could be this busy, you know."

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"Commander."

When had he arrived? The sudden presence caught Yuder by surprise, but that feeling quickly dissipated as Kishiar approached.

"I've watched and listened to what you've been up to all day today. You truly didn't rest even for a moment."

"I did rest. It wasn't particularly strenuous."

"Since when did 'not strenuous' and 'resting' mean the same thing?"

"Did you perhaps come because you're displeased with the new training plan proposal I announced today?"

"Why would that be the case? On the contrary, you did it too well; that's the problem."

With a small smile and a subtle furrowing of his eyebrows, Kishiar gently settled onto the edge of the long table.

"I'm really worried. What am I to do with my assistant who doesn't even know how to rest?"

"You don't need to do anything. Should you really be out like this just after a day, Commander?"

"If you're worried, would you rest with me in the bedroom like yesterday?"

He responded with an insinuation that Kishiar, who hardly even sleeps and is always working, wasn't in a position to advise him. However, Kishiar's comeback was even more pointed.

"When did we rest together?"

"Having a pleasant conversation in the bedroom without doing anything else is generally referred to as resting."

"There's a nice phrase called 'sickroom visit.'"

Furthermore, didn't their conversation mainly revolve around work? As he retorted sharply, Kishiar chuckled.

"You're right. I've lost this round."

Despite declaring his defeat, the energy radiating from him was cheerful and gentle. Yuder forcefully pulled his gaze away from Kishiar's captivating face and opened his mouth.

"You surely didn't come all the way down here just to joke. Why are you here?"

"I was curious whether you received the second gift I left at your quarters."

Kishiar finally got to the point. Recalling the red medium in his possession, he nodded.

"Yes, I've confirmed it."

It was a gift beyond Yuder's wildest expectations. How could he possibly articulate the surprise he felt when he saw it yesterday? Kishiar's face, too, bore a satisfied smile as he noticed Yuder's faint smile and brightened eyes.

"Did you like it? I thought you would."

"Yes, I'm truly thankful for your..."

"I had two knights from the Peletta order in the capital waiting in turn to buy that new product. It's not accepting reservations, you see."

"...Pardon?"

Interrupting my thanks, his unexpected words caused me to forget what I was saying.

"Though it's made from fruit, no one has yet discovered the secret to its beautiful color and taste. It truly deserves to be called one of the capital's specialties. I'm glad that it suited your taste as well. It makes giving it as a gift worthwhile."

"Are you talking about... candy?"

"Hm? The only gift I gave was that, did you receive something else?"

Faced with his natural smile, Yuder blinked for a moment before exhaling a long breath.

'So, he's keeping the fact that he gave me the medium officially a secret.'

Even though no one was around, you never know who might be listening in on people's affairs. It couldn't hurt to be careful.

"No, I didn't. I will enjoy it."

"There's no need to savor it too much, but you can't eat it all in one day either. If you eat too much, it'll rot your teeth. So, you're only allowed to have up to five a day."

"...Yes."

Indeed, it was somewhat unnerving to receive affectionate advice in an exaggerated manner as if he was a child, but what could be done? At this moment, Kishiar was the Commander, and Yuder was his assistant.

Upon hearing Yuder's awkward response, Kishiar burst into a vibrant smile, dusted off his seat, and rose.

"Shall we have a late dinner now?"

"Have you not eaten yet?"

"You haven't either."

While it was simply that Yuder had skipped dinner because of advising the members, it was a mystery why Kishiar, who had no such obligation, had not eaten yet.

'Has Nathan Zuckerman left the place?'

"I understand. But the cafeteria might already be closed."

"There's no need to eat within the quarters. There are plenty of eateries outside."

Kishiar casually responded and nonchalantly adjusted the bracelet around his wrist. His face and hair blurred momentarily, transforming into an unremarkable brown hair and faint facial features.

In retrospect, he was not in Cavalry attire from the start. Only then did Yuder realize with a hint of disappointment that Kishiar had planned this from the beginning.

"You certainly came well-prepared."

"I tend to be meticulous."

Kishiar cheerfully took Yuder's comment and extended his hand with a jovial expression.

"We've been working without a break since this morning, shouldn't we relax over dinner? Let me show you what it means to rest. Let's go."

There was not even a hint of room for refusal. Considering he hadn't planned to leave the Cavalry today, it was somewhat of a relief that he hadn't put on the conspicuous black Cavalry outerwear. Yuder hurriedly followed Kishiar, who strode out as if he could fly.

The nightlife inside the 7th wall after the harvest festival was quieter than before, but the ambiance seemed somewhat brighter. Kishiar, who had easily pierced through all sorts of shortcuts within the Imperial Knight Headquarters, was now effortlessly blending into the common folk in the streets.

Yuder, trailing behind him, suddenly tuned into a conversation of drunkards passing by.

"Maybe, they reclaimed the body because of the incident at the Apeto family's..."

"The funeral got canceled. Are they never going to hold it?"

"We common folks can't possibly understand the inner workings of the high and mighty, but that third son was truly exceptional..."

'Ah. They're talking about the incident at the funeral of Lenore Shand Apeto.'

Yuder was shocked that the news had spread so widely, even though he had heard it directly from Kishiar, who was responsible for disrupting the funeral. But while Yuder was lost in thought, watching the departing drunkards, someone grabbed his wrist. When he looked up, it was Kishiar, who had changed his appearance.

"I turned around while walking and got surprised when I didn't see you."

"Oh, I apologize."

"I wonder what caught your attention so much."

"I was just lost in some thoughts..."

He couldn't confess that he was eavesdropping on a conversation about the Apeto family, so he averted his gaze. Kishiar exhaled a short sigh and looked away, his gaze fixed on the three drunkards who had disappeared around the corner of an alley.

"If you wanted to drink instead of having dinner, you should've told me."

"No, that's not it."

"There's no harm anyway, so you can consume whatever you want."

Despite saying no, it was of little use. Kishiar, taking hold of Yuder's wrist, changed their direction and headed somewhere else. The place where he stopped was in front of an old tavern, where laughter could be heard leaking out. Entering through the door hanging beneath an almost broken wooden sign, Kishiar looked around several times before promptly finding an empty seat and sitting down.

"Sit."

"..."

Other than the pillars where the lanterns hung and the table stacked with plenty of alcohol, the rest of the place was intentionally left dark. The place was filled with a strong smell of alcohol that one could get drunk just by sniffing it, but surprisingly, the atmosphere wasn't bad at all. As Yuder instinctively checked the surroundings for anyone who looked dangerous, a man with a bandit-like expression wearing an apron approached and slammed down two large beer mugs.

"Two beers. Anything else you need?"

"We'll need a side dish, Southern-style roast pork leg. And if you have the ingredients, some fried beans as well."

As Kishiar casually responded with a wink, the bandit-like man grinned.

"Nice combination. I'll bring it over soon."

"He served us beer right away, even though we didn't order any."

"That's the only thing they sell."

Kishiar casually replied to Yuder's murmured comment after the man had disappeared.

"You seem to come here often."

"True. I'm someone who never misses a good time, anywhere. I know almost all the stores within the capital."

Kishiar chuckled while downing his beer nonchalantly.

"The owner of this place is a retired mercenary who used to work as a bodyguard in the inner wall district. He started this place using his connections, so they have quite a variety of dishes. The taste of the alcohol is not bad either."

"...I see."

Yuder was surprised that he hadn't known about such a place, despite having lived much longer than Kishiar before dying. In his previous life, he had never come to such a place with him either.

"Do you often come to places like this when you go out at night? It would seem difficult to come alone, though....."

"Of course, I don't come alone."

Kishiar cut him short.

"I have people to meet."

"People to meet... No, never mind."

"Not lovers of the night."

Kishiar let out a laugh as if guessing what Yuder was thinking.

"Friends. Or subordinates. Or informants. Or people I need to observe. There are always plenty of people to meet."

"..."

Friends, subordinates, informants, and subjects of observation. Yuder was taken aback that none of the words he had anticipated were included.

Even in his previous life, Kishiar often went out and came back, changing his appearance frequently. After initially asking him where he was going and receiving a reply not to ask, he had written it off as simply nighttime fun and completely ignored it.

Just as the present Yuder was different from the Yuder of the past, the Kishiar of the past was definitely different from the current Kishiar. Thinking about it, the past Kishiar had certainly put up walls and tried to push Yuder away.

Seeing the contrast between the past Kishiar, who would not answer anything, and the current Kishiar, who would answer any question asked, Yuder felt the distinct difference he hadn't noticed before and felt a little odd.

"Were you surprised?"

"...No."

Yuder forcefully pushed away the memories from his previous life. Shortly after, a plateful of dishes arrived. The Southern-style roast pork leg, heavily sprinkled with spices, tasted less overwhelming than he had expected.

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"It's not as oily as southern cuisine usually is, is it?"

Kishiar started the conversation as if reading Yuder's thoughts.

"Yes, it's delicious."

"You eat well. It's good to see. If it's not enough, I'll order more. Eat plenty."

With that, Kishiar naturally picked up a deep-fried bean, complete with shell, and tossed it into his mouth. His behavior didn't seem out of place, even when compared to the surrounding commoners.

For a while, they ate their meat and fried food in silence, sipping their drinks. Once his belly was somewhat full, Yuder raised his head and saw Kishiar, who sat opposite him, resting his chin in his hand and gazing to one side. Yuder turned his head in the same direction.

There, three men were heartily drinking and chatting.

"I'm thinking of importing goods from the north next year..."

"When I've saved enough for retirement, I might open a place like this. I'll have to discuss it with my wife, though..."

"After all, despite everything, this place is the best..."

Even though their conversations didn't seem to follow a coherent theme, it was intriguing how they could continue conversing. It didn't seem like an interesting conversation, but Kishiar continued to sip his drink, watching their chatter with a slight smile playing on his lips.

What could possibly be so interesting about it?

Was he simply fascinated by the act of observing commoners, with whom he usually didn't interact?

While Yuder was musing over these thoughts and sipping his beer, which wasn't strong enough to get him drunk, the men finally got up, paid their bill, and left the pub. Kishiar's gaze turned back to Yuder.

"Your eyes look like you're unsure of what I find so interesting."

"...No, not at all."

"Well, there's nothing I can do if it seems strange to you. I quite enjoy listening to such conversations."

"You enjoy them?"

Despite his denial, Yuder couldn't help but question him. Kishiar kindly refrained from pointing out the contradiction.

"Yes. There's nothing as intriguing as observing strangers engaging in peaceful conversation."

The conversation of strangers. How could that be enjoyable?

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand your meaning, Commander."

As Yuder responded cautiously, Kishiar shook his head.

"There's not a deep meaning to it. But isn't there anything better to understand the public sentiment than the stories shared over drinks? Listening to peaceful conversations like earlier, no matter how troublesome things are at the top, it reassures me that someone still thinks this country, ruled by His Majesty the Emperor, is okay."

While speaking at a leisurely pace, Kishiar ran his finger over the bead of condensation on his glass.

"Well, it is childish of me to constantly seek reassurance that the path I have willingly chosen is correct. Hence, it's a secret that I listen with such thoughts in mind."

"Others would think that I'm simply too interested in the common people." As Kishiar murmured this, he quickly suppressed his laughter and finished off the last of his beer. Yuder, leaving only a few pieces of bone and nearly finishing his grilled hind leg, opened his mouth with difficulty.

"So... it's not a secret to me?"

"Will you insult me as a hypocrite because you heard this? Or despise me for being childish?"

Naturally, it was neither. Upon witnessing Yuder's silence, a soft satisfaction rose and disappeared on Kishiar's face, as if saying, 'That's exactly why.'

"Will you have more?"

At that moment, a man with a bandit-like demeanor, having cleared all other tables, approached and looked down at their nearly empty table, asking. Tilting his head as if it didn't matter what Kishiar chose, he turned his gaze towards Yuder.

"More to drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Alright, get up then."

Rising from his seat, Kishiar took a few coins from his pocket and handed them to the man. They had finished their meal and he assumed they would leave, but the direction Kishiar began to walk was the exact opposite of where they had originally come from.

"Commander... where are you going?"

Kishiar, rarely more serious than usual, swallowed the word he had intended to use and responded.

"I'm going for a walk. The night breeze feels good and I'm full from the meal. That's what rest is."

It seemed that he still had not given up on his dream of teaching Yuder what real rest was. Yuder swallowed his words of protest and sighed.

"Is there a place to walk around here?"

"Why wouldn't there be? If we walk, we'll come across numerous beautiful sights in the capital. The closest place from here is... yes, it must be where the Emperor's Sword Mark is."

Despite his face being too faint to remember after using the magic tool, Kishiar's voice in the darkness of the street was consistently low and beautiful.

"Come closer. There's no need to follow me from behind."

He blocked Yuder's attempt to subtly back away, leaving him no choice. Yuder walked shoulder to shoulder with Kishiar. Even though nobody would know who they were, he felt an odd tension seeping through his palms. As Yuder was feigning calmness, Kishiar suddenly opened his mouth to ask a question.

"Have you seen the Emperor's Sword Mark?"

"...No, I haven't."

The only time he'd seen it was in passing in his previous life, so it seemed right to say he hadn't seen it now.

"It's the trace of a gigantic sword left on a solid wall built by the first emperor. Originally, they were going to build a city wall there, but after the first emperor died, they knocked down everything except that one piece of wall."

"I see."

"It's said to be the largest mark among those left in history by Swordmasters. Every Swordmaster thereafter visited the place at least once to compare their own marks left with wooden swords. Yet, not a single one left a larger mark."

While walking and talking, a stone wall erected not far away revealed itself. The old wall was left standing like a fence along the thicket, and a deep sword mark horizontally etched without end at chest level was clear even from a distance.

"Do you see it? That sword mark."

"Yes, I see it."

Kishiar leisurely walked closer to the Emperor's Sword Mark. Yuder looked at the similar yet different marks around the sword mark. Plaques indicating who had challenged and left a mark were attached to the other sword marks left above and below the Emperor's Sword Mark.

'There were really a lot of names that I had only seen in history books who had come here to challenge.'

However, as Kishiar had stated, there were no traces more profound, clearer, and lasting than the Emperor's Sword Mark.

"There's a superstition that one's luck improves if they walk around this sword mark from end to end."

"Really?"

"Do you really think so? It's just a myth created for diplomatic and tourism purposes. Those learning the sword among foreign dignitaries always wish to visit here. It was created to make them feel better, believing they could attain some luck while they're at it."

Kishiar, who freely spoke words that would disappoint the visiting dignitaries, started walking along the sword mark slowly. Yuder, following him, suddenly wondered if any of these countless sword marks were Kishiar's.

He and his adjutant, Nathan Zucker, were both capable of using sword aura. So, might they have secretly come and challenged the Emperor's Sword Mark? Once curiosity took root, Yuder found himself unable to suppress his desire for an answer. After a moment of hesitation, he finally asked,

"So, Commander, you can also use sword aura, right?"

"Hmm?"

Kishiar turned his head. He was not only capable of using sword aura; he was also the owner of a divine sword. Although Yuder had rarely seen him carrying the divine sword properly.

"Why do you ask?"

Looking at the traces of others left on the Emperor's Sword Mark, Yuder continued,

"Could there be any of your marks among these sword marks?"

"Are you referring to me? No..."

As if unexpectedly, Kishiar turned his gaze to the deep traces left by time.

"I don't have any here."

"Why? You're more than qualified."

"Well, because... I guess I've never thought about it."

Kishiar smiled and shrugged.

"I never considered challenging this place as it's not a power to reveal openly. I apologize if this disappoints you."

"I see."

He wasn't disappointed. Just a bit regretful. As Yuder continued walking along the rugged wall of sword marks, he spoke,

"It's a pity. Who knows, if you had left a scar, it might have been bigger than the Emperor's Sword Mark."

"You think so?"

Kishiar broke into laughter.

"You always overestimate me."

Overestimating someone who held four powers within one body? Yuder felt as if he was underestimating him, unable to know the limits of his power.

"But... yes. Listening to you reminds me of something."

Kishiar suddenly stopped walking. Raising his hand towards the Emperor's Sword Mark, a smile played at his lips.

"I think I wanted to leave my name here when I was young. The one who taught me swordsmanship kindled an unwarranted hope that I could do it if I tried."

The mysterious smile in his eyes as he traced the deep sword mark, large enough to fit a wrist inside, suggested he was recalling an unfathomable past moment.

"It's not a pleasant memory. That's probably why I didn't cling to this place."

"You could do it now."

"Do you want me to challenge this place?"

That question, oddly, seemed to imply more than just a literal challenge.

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"No one has ever encouraged me to use the power I've possessed until now."

Could it have been because he was incapable of utilizing his strength due to his body?

Yuder recalled a tale of a vessel he'd once heard, feeling a twinge of regret as he wondered if he'd been reckless in bringing up such a reckless topic.

"I didn't wish for you to harm yourself to do this. If I've overstepped my bounds, I apologize."

"No. Actually, it feels quite good. I was curious about what it feels like to live up to someone's expectations."

"It'd been a long while." Muttering under his breath, Kishiar's elongated fingers traced the countless sword marks of nameless knights engraved on the Emperor's Sword Mark. Unlike the sword marks of famous swordmasters that were marked with nameplates, there were even more marks left by those unnamed, simply regarded as scratches and left as such. Despite knowing this, he wondered why they left their marks on the blade.

"Yes, there were times in my youth when I was quite upset. After all, how easily could I accept that I, a human being with strength, must always step back and hide it? The life of not being expected of anything means that I should not expect anything beyond survival from myself. It took a considerable amount of time to accept that."

A life with no expectations. It made him wonder if this wasn't just about his physical condition, but perhaps this statement also pierced through the trajectory of the life Kishiar La Orr had to live as the Duke of Peletta.

The instinct to use his strength, and the desire to do so, were suppressed, trampled, and continually pushed down as he lived. The beast's blood-red eyes, now accustomed to intense restraint and patience, looked numbly at the faintly weathered sword marks.

"Even now, when I can finally break free from it, when I see you, I become aware that I haven't changed, and neither has my surroundings."

His voice, which had been whispering softly, fell silent, and his gaze shifted to Yuder's face.

"That's why I need you, Yuder Aile."

At that moment, his heart pounded loudly.

"I'd like you to teach me more. Things I couldn't have, and what I need. You probably know."

"..."

He was just a sinner who committed foolish acts, died, and returned, he was not great enough to receive the intense emotions nested in his gaze. Yuder swallowed the surging guilt and bowed his head.

"I'm not sure. I'm already your assistant. If you give me orders, that's all, but what more are you saying..."

"Orders are not enough."

Kishiar quietly responded, reaching out his hand. His fingertips, gently brushing over the pale cheek, lightly lifted the chin, forcing their eyes to meet.

"Something I still don't know..."

Something still unknown to him.

His downward gaze said so. His gaze, which he could not escape from, inexplicably deepened. Suddenly, a captivating red color emerged over his normally hidden brown eyes.

The touched skin strangely grew hotter and hotter. As he breathed shallowly, shivering as if drawn to the heat, suddenly a force clenching his chin made it a bit painful.

"Ah..."

He snapped back to consciousness in surprise from the pain. His hand had already fallen again.

'Just now. What was that?'

What on earth was that strange feeling, as if he was being drawn towards something?

"Alright. I'll show you what you wanted."

Kishiar, who had turned his body towards the Emperor's Sword Mark, quietly opened his mouth.

"It's a rule to meet expectations when they're given. Let's give it a try."

"Eh?"

"The sword mark, I mean."

"Really?"

Yuder, startled by the belated response, quickly forgot about the strange sensation he had just felt.

"But not right now."

"There is no wooden sword handy to leave a sword mark," Kishiar murmured, showing off his empty belt.

"I was planning to announce it after wrapping up Apeto Family's trial anyway, I'll definitely show you then."

Thinking of Divine Sword Orr, which had been stored in Kishiar's office for a long time, Yuder felt his blood boil with anticipation.

"As for the divine sword..."

"It's time to reveal who its master is. The time has come."

"Are you sure?"

Being the master of the divine sword was never easy. Despite his lack of interest in being the master of the divine sword in his previous life, he could feel how many were targeting him because of it.

Yet, this event was sure to be the most solid method for Kishiar, who had been neglected by many until now, to gain immediate recognition.

"If the trial ends as we wish, then Duke Diarca and Prince Katchian will officially step forward, and we won't be able to face them the way we have so far. This has been planned in advance."

To face an enemy who would not be off-guard, such preparation was necessary. It appeared that revealing his ownership of the divine sword had been delayed as a card to be used for that purpose.

"...I will help you, no matter what."

As Yuder nodded, a gentle smile crept onto his face again, as if he had never been serious.

"Shall we finish our walk for now? We haven't even done half of it."

"...Are you really planning to walk around this long wall?"

"Of course. Are you going to miss this opportunity to grab some luck after coming this far?"

"You were the one who said it was a superstition."

But his objection was easily ignored. Only after walking around the wall alongside the seemingly joyous Kishiar could Yuder finish his exercise, masquerading as rest, and return to the office.

"Did you enjoy today's rest?"

"...Next time, I will rest by myself. You don't have to worry too much."

"Oh dear. If you didn't enjoy it, I'll have to try harder next time."

What did he mean by trying harder? Yuder didn't even dare to ask. Seeing Kishiar bursting into laughter, Yuder felt his mood plummet further.

"Please go in."

"Alright. Sleep well, see you tomorrow."

Kishiar ruffled Yuder's fringe lightly and disappeared up the stairs to his office.

'...Is this what he meant by not letting my guard down?'

It seemed clear that he'd taken a liking to this prank since the last time. Yuder stood quietly for a moment, tidying his tousled hair, then let out a sigh.

It had been a strange day. If he had told the Yuder Aile of his previous life that he himself had had dinner in a shabby pub with Kishiar, walked around, and heard all sorts of things, he wouldn't have believed it.

'When I first came here, I hadn't expected to become so close with Kishiar La Orr.'

That was definitely the case at the start. But how did it happen that their relationship changed so much? Yuder found himself somewhat foolish for not getting angry even as Kishiar openly teased him like a child.

'But what exactly was that gaze back then... I really can't figure it out.'

What was that peculiar sensation he felt as the gaze they shared in front of the stone wall engraved with the Emperor's Sword Mark began to darken? It vanished so quickly that it was hard to guess if he had genuinely felt it, yet the warm thrill he experienced then was still faintly present in his mind.

Could it have been the attraction between second gender Awakeners that had come up in Beltrail's research? Yuder rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Of course, he couldn't feel the same sensation now.

The next day, as soon as daylight broke, unexpected visitors came looking for the Cavalry.

"I've heard there are members of the Cavalry here! May I see someone named Yuder, by any chance?"

Seeing the soldiers in imperial uniforms who came shouting, the startled Cavalry went to find Yuder and informed him of the visitors. As Yuder stepped out of the Cavalry quarters, his eyes widened slightly upon seeing Sunz and Emon, the imperial soldiers he had met several months ago during the Red Stone recovery mission.

"Sunz."

"Yuder. Long time no see!"

Sunz, who had the power of vision, greeted him with a wave. His sad, sad smile was just as he remembered.

"And Mr. Emon, you're here too."

"Just call me Emon. What's with the 'Mr'? Gives me goosebumps. Anyway, it's good to see you looking well."

Emon greeted him with a grimace. Yuder led them to his room. There were too many prying eyes outside and in the lounge; it would have been hard to escape the curious stares that were already gathering.

"I should offer you something to drink, but I'm afraid I have nothing. My apologies."

"Don't worry about it. We're the ones who dropped in unexpectedly, after all."

Sunz chuckled and shook his head.

"But to come here so suddenly... was there something?"

"Ah. We were also personnel dispatched to maintain law and order during the festival period. Before heading back, we wanted to see you again, so we searched and searched."

Yuder was quite surprised at Sunz's words. He hadn't expected them to be part of the imperial forces that had been in the capital throughout the festival. He hadn't even imagined it as he had not encountered them once.

"I had no idea. If I knew you were here, I would have paid you a visit."

"Weren't we all busy? Emon and I were assigned to different places. I was at the 5th Wall, and Emon was at the 6th Wall. We were dispatched to prevent potential monument destruction, so we hardly ran into anyone else."

"I see."

Hearing Yuder's response, Sunz suddenly grinned and lowered his voice.

"But you know, this is a big deal. Do you understand? The fact that we, who were provincial soldiers, were chosen as temporary peacekeepers in the capital - it's something that's never happened before."

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Sunz tried to contain his excitement, but his eyes betrayed an irrepressible sense of satisfaction.

"Besides Emon and me, many of our Awakeners friends who had worked together in the mountains for two years back then were selected this time. The southern army officer who picked us didn't explicitly state that it was based on our abilities, but I'm certain that had a significant influence. So... Yuder, you were right!"

Yuder recalled the words he had given them before. Even if not immediately, soon at a higher place, or when the empire would need their power, he had told them not to neglect their development. He was even surprised himself that the results appeared so quickly.

"Do you mean they recognized your abilities and picked you?"

"After you left, we also finished our mission and scattered back to our original regions. But soon after, General Gino suddenly ordered all southern army soldiers to undergo physical examinations earlier than usual. It was the first time I revealed what my ability was to the superiors, and they were extremely surprised. Emon, you saw that too, right?"

At the cue of Sunz's words, Emon also opened his mouth.

"Right. After that, the salaries of the Awakened soldiers increased a bit, and unlike other soldiers, we were given time to train our abilities separately. That's when I started to think that something might change, just like you said."

The once cynical and apathetic demeanor he had shown had softened considerably, likely due to this.

"From what we heard, General Gino suddenly changed the treatment of the Awakened soldiers because of the influence of Duke Peletta and the Cavalry. I can't tell you how much we've heard about the Cavalry since we arrived in the capital."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Even the superiors who summoned us to the capital mentioned you guys and hinted several times that they would like our abilities to be on par with the Cavalry. Isn't that all thanks to the Awakeners, who proved their strength through the Cavalry?"

Sunz's eyes glittered with admiration and favor as he looked at Yuder.

"They said there would be great rewards when we finish this mission and return. Maybe... maybe we finally have a chance for promotion."

"Really?"

Yuder was inwardly surprised at the mention of rewards. It would be surprising if they were given a chance for promotion as they said, but the first thing that came to his mind was the speculation that the military might have decided to create a special unit like in his previous life.

'Unlike in my previous life, the treatment of Awakened soldiers is improving in the presence of General Gino Bordelli, so it won't be like that time even if a special unit is created again...'

"Well, the speculation that a promotion will be the reward is not certain, but Sunz and I suspect that it might be."

Emon scratched his head with a smug smile.

"It might sound like we're bragging... but after meeting you, both Sunz and I worked hard. While on missions, we've achieved results that have surprised the superiors several times. That's why we have high hopes for the reward."

Looking at the young man's face filled with anticipation for the future, it seemed like a lie that he had been the same person he first met. Yuder looked at the two men's faces and slowly opened his mouth.

"That's really great news. Then... since it might be a waste just to see faces while you're visiting the Cavalry, how about watching us train before you leave?"

"Would that be alright?"

"We're grateful, but isn't the training content classified...?"

Sunz and Emon, looking at each other's faces, cautiously questioned.

"The time is merely spent on basic training as a group. There's really nothing classified about that. I'm sure our Commander would permit this much."

While the future was uncertain, Sunz and Emon had high potential to play significant roles as Awakeners in the military later on. It couldn't hurt to provide them an experience that would further develop their abilities, given their already considerable goodwill towards Yuder.

"Coincidentally, today is the first day of our newly revised training. Let's go."

The two men rose hurriedly, following Yuder with flustered expressions. They left the room and headed towards the training field behind the quarters.

"Damn! The flame went out again!"

"Ugh! When will you be able to control your strength? If I hadn't dodged, I would have been dead!"

"30 seconds? You call that maintaining? How the hell did you get into the Cavalry?"

As soon as they entered, they saw a scene of chaos that was many times greater than usual. Numerous soldiers were gathered on the training field, rolling around on the ground in disarray, spewing a mix of dying noises and curses. Seeing the pandemonium and loud noises, Sunz and Emon's eyes widened.

"This... This is training...? It's not a brawl...?"

"Do we have to join...?"

"It's not a fight, it's sparring training. The aim is to pair individuals with opposing weaknesses to train as if in a real fight."

Yuder calmly explained, observing the scene.

"One side can control their strength well but can't maintain it for long. On the other hand, the opposite group can maintain their power well but can't control it. The winners of the sparring..."

Suddenly, a fireball flew toward them. Yuder immediately extended his hand, creating a curtain of water. With an explosive sound, the fireball hit the water wall and quickly disintegrated.

"Uh, my apologies. Anyway, the winners are given the chance to eat a special meal at dinner tonight."

"...That's it?"

Sunz, who thought he was about to be hit by the fireball, asked while calming his pounding heart.

"So all these people are... undergoing this dangerous and intense training just to have a better meal...?"

"It may seem like a trivial reward, but it's important to have an achievable, yet definite goal. You'll find yourself passionately immersed before you know it."

It was training they had to do anyway. In Yuder's experience, the key to effectively developing abilities was to create an environment that genuinely felt threatening, like a real fight.

At first, they may think that they can do without the special meal. However, once the mood is set, they become intensely focused as if their lives depended on it. And once the individual training that only requires personal responsibility for failure evolves into a team battle where the whole team shares the victory or defeat, the level of concentration skyrockets.

'This will serve as training and also foster camaraderie, which will be useful for future tasks. It's a win-win.'

Though some were moving lazily on the first day, he found it a relief that everyone seemed to be sincerely sparring more than he expected.

"That's... impressive."

Sunz's pupils were shaking uncontrollably.

"It's not just here. Let's go check out other places."

Afterward, they briefly observed the members training in other arenas arranged around them. Although the content differed slightly, the earnest effort and tenacity shared by all remained constant. In contrast to Yuder's satisfaction, a light of fear gradually faded from the eyes of Sunz and Emon.

By the time they had to return, and they arrived back in front of their quarters, both men were engrossed in deep thought, remaining silent.

"Were you shocked? You both seem lost in thought."

"Ah... no, not at all. It was just more terrifying... no, more systematic than we expected."

In response to Yuder's question, Sunz hastily waved his hand. He then sighed with a hesitant expression.

"Actually, we also tried to devise training methods with our comrades, but the consensus was that we gained more from completing a single monster extermination mission. However, after seeing today's training in the Cavalry, I realized there's a way to train without necessarily courting danger. Of course, it didn't look easy..."

Sunz's words elicited a nod from Emon in agreement.

"It did look quite challenging."

"How could you call something an 'exercise' if it's easy?"

Yuder interrupted their conversation sharply.

"You have to train more than the other knight orders and mages who have already settled down. Only then you will not miss the opportunity when it comes."

"I see... You're right. If Awakeners want to make a place for themselves, they must outperform those who are already in position."

Sunz murmured lost in thought, then nodded, a smile crossing his face.

"Thank you, Yuder. This has been a really valuable experience."

"Not at all. If you ever need assistance, don't hesitate to contact me again."

Yuder smiled, catching the questioning looks from the two men.

"We may be from different organizations, but we're all Awakeners, aren't we? I believe that if we want to change the perception of Awakeners within the Empire, we can't just rely on one side doing well. Our Commander also said on the day of the Cavalry's entrance ceremony to act for our own freedom."

If Kishiar were to hear this, who knows what he would say.

"So that's it. For freedom..."

Sunz and Emon gazed up at the Cavalry building, murmuring to themselves.

"There was such a deep meaning to the Cavalry... I don't quite understand it because it's too complicated, but it's incredibly moving..."

"Hm? I haven't seen you two before. Who are you?"

However, a voice from behind them abruptly interrupted the serene moment, causing the atmosphere to stiffen instantly. Seeing the shocked expressions of Sunz and Emon, Yuder turned around. There stood Kishiar, wearing a cloak over his uniform, walking towards them with Nathan Zuckerman.

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"Commander."

As if they had just returned from an outing somewhere, they lowered their heads to greet a carriage that was just disappearing behind them. Sunz and Emon, who were next to Yuder, also hurriedly lowered their heads and stretched out their hands to give an imperial military-style salute.

"Good day, Duke."

"We are honored to meet you, Duke."

"Lift your heads."

The reply was gentle, but Sunz and Emon struggled to comply. It was natural, considering this was likely their first time facing someone as high-ranking as Kishiar. If it had been any other noble, they would have understandably become angry upon being disregarded, but both Kishiar and Nathan, his steadfast adjutant, were exceptionally patient.

Only when the ensuing silence had made the two men grow even more uneasy, and they had fully raised their heads, did Kishiar speak again with a smile.

"Imperial soldiers, are you... From where?"

"I... I am Sunz, from the Southern Army, the Gulkan region!"

"I am Emon, also of the Gulkan region, Southern Army!"

Hearing the mention of the Southern Army, Kishiar slightly shifted his gaze, presumably guessing why they were accompanying Yuder. In response to Kishiar's meaningful look, Yuder gave a slight nod and stepped forward.

"They are acquaintances with whom I previously formed a bond. They were deployed as peacekeepers for the festival. Despite being busy, they wanted to see me before returning to Gulkan, so they paid a visit. Good men, indeed."

"Oh, I see. Are you also Awakeners, then?"

"Yes, y-yes, we are!"

Sunz answered in the most formal tone he had used yet.

"What abilities do you possess?"

"I have the modest ability of vision. Emon beside me can summon a large amount of fire very quickly!"

At that moment, Kishiar's eyes sparkled with renewed interest.

"You both possess valuable abilities. You will undoubtedly become significant pillars of the Imperial Army."

"I believe so as well."

Hearing Yuder align with Kishiar's praise, Sunz's face flushed beet red. If the person on the other side hadn't been Kishiar, one could have presumed him to be embarrassed. Emon, too, who had been keeping a calm demeanor, now bore a flustered expression as he offered his thanks.

"Th-thank you...."

"I've had discussions about the Awakened soldiers within the Imperial Army with General Gino. With the rapid changes across the continent, we agree that we need fresh blood like you."

"D-did the General say that?!"

The casual remark seemingly fell on deaf ears for the overwhelmed Sunz and Emon, but not for Yuder.

'As I thought.'

It seemed undeniable that Kishiar had informed General Gino about the Awakened soldiers, thereby altering the situation.

"Indeed... I hope to encounter brave soldiers with exceptional abilities for good causes again. You seemed to be about to leave - do you need guidance out of the grounds?"

"We're good, thank you!"

Sunz, having responded energetically, turned to Yuder, panting slightly.

"Yuder. Today... thank you. And, next time..."

"Yes. Until we meet again. Remember, the offer I made earlier stands at any time."

The two men, who had stared at Yuder as if impressed by his dispassionate reply, quickly turned their bodies and promptly made a counter-response before scurrying away. As Yuder watched their backs disappear rapidly, he heard the sound of Kishiar's chuckling.

"Interesting characters, they are. Did you meet them during the retrieval operation?"

"Yes. I heard that the treatment of Awakened soldiers has suddenly changed within the Southern Army. By any chance, did you have a hand in that, Commander?"

"All I did was have a few words with General Gino after listening to you. How much influence could I possibly have on the army? But I'm glad that such a change occurred."

Kishiar, who vaguely responded, subtly hinted at future plans with a smile.

"By the way, General Gino was suggesting forming a group within the Southern Army, much like the Cavalry, composed of Awakeners. It might be that the Cavalry and the Awakened soldiers of the Southern Army will need to collaborate in the future, so we should maintain the connections that we've already built."

"Yes. Of course, I intend to do so."

Kishiar, too, had similar thoughts to Yuder and had been moving accordingly. In their shared gaze, brief moments of satisfaction and admiration for each other flickered past. Kishiar, who naturally reached his hand above Yuder's head while smiling at him, found himself just reaching air.

"I didn't even need to give specific instructions for our actions to align so well. I must say, I chose my assistant wisely."

"Thanks for the compliment, but I won't fall for it a third time."

Yuder quickly stepped back before Kishiar could ruffle his hair.

"Ah, that's a shame."

Kishiar, looking at his empty hand, turned his body and stepped into the entrance of the lodging building. Nathan Zuckerman followed behind him. Yuder only noticed the two boxes that Nathan had been holding. Lowering his voice, he asked,

"Come to think of it... where did you go?"

"After meeting with the Peletta Knights, we went to the Imperial Mage building."

Nathan replied flatly in place of Kishiar.

"Well, there were some things to pick up."

Kishiar's explanation only deepened the mystery. If the knights from the Peletta Knight Order were not invited to the Cavalry and Kishiar had to go and fetch the items himself, then whatever was

inside must be highly confidential. Moreover, it was from the Imperial Mage building. Yuder couldn't fathom the answer, no matter how much he thought about it.

"Curious?"

"Yes."

"Not even refusing once, typical of you."

Kishiar, finding something amusing, chuckled once again and beckoned Yuder to come closer.

"Follow me. I was planning to call you and explain anyway."

As soon as Kishiar entered his office, he took off his cloak and handed it to Nathan Zuckerman.

"Nathan, clean this up and then carry on with the task I gave you earlier."

"Understood."

After Nathan had carefully placed the boxes on the table and left, Kishiar took a deep breath and sat down. A faint sign of fatigue, which was not apparent until now, could be seen on his face as he moved his head to loosen his muscles.

"Going out early and coming back, I'm finally a bit relaxed. How is the training progress going? Is it going well?"

"Yes. So far, there have been no problems."

"When do you plan to participate in the group training?"

"According to the schedule... it would be in two weeks."

The second gender manifestation had ended, and his body had fully recovered, but the reason Yuder did not participate in the group training that day was due to the internal rules Kishiar had previously established and announced. According to these rules, Cavalry members could not participate in intense training or assignments for two weeks following their manifestation.

Yuder had initially planned to stand back for a while, observing how the training was progressing and making corrections as necessary, so this didn't pose a problem, although it was a bit disappointing. Kishiar seemed to catch Yuder's slight regret and gave a faint smile.

"When I made that rule, I didn't have any particular thoughts, but it has turned out to be quite useful. I should thank the legal scholars who worked hard with me."

"..."

"Anyway, I'm glad to hear things are going well. I'll be preoccupied with the trial of the Apeto family and the issues arising from it, so you'll have to work hard with the Deputy Commanders in the meantime."

"Yes."

Yuder had expected this. That very morning, the members had been fervently discussing the news that the disrupted trial of the Apeto family was to resume in three days. Thanks to them, Yuder learned that the rumor about Kishiar killing the second son of the Apeto family, Lenore, had now changed into a rumor about the Crown Prince.

Although the members who spread the rumor believed in Kishiar's innocence and were mostly angered towards the Crown Prince, the public opinion was not necessarily the same.

"So, did you collect the items in those boxes in connection with that?"

"Yes. Um... one of them is."

Kishiar gave a curious answer and turned his gaze to the small, sturdy wooden boxes on the table. As he opened the lid of the white box on the right, a thick dust smell quickly filled the air.

"What is this...?"

"This is the poison ingredient you found on Lenore Shand Apeto's corpse and in his letter."

The first box contained a dried white mushroom bundle.

"When I checked it, this mushroom hardly grows in the capital and its vicinity. As you said, commoners sometimes use it as medicine, not poison, so there were almost no cases where it was properly harvested and brought in a refined form."

Kishiar reached out and fiddled with the outside of the opened box.

"The Peletta Knights and the informants have worked quite hard to trace where the Crown Prince got the poison. This is the result."

Yuder immediately straightened up and closely examined the mushroom.

"Did you succeed in tracking it down?"

"They were pretty cunning... but yes, we've found a lead."

The red eyes of Kishiar narrowed, glinting with a cold light.

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"One of the Crown Prince's servants was confirmed to have refined it in a distant land under his command and brought it to the Capital."

"So then..."

As he met Yuder's gaze, Kishiar nodded with a sense of satisfaction.

"Right. We've secured additional evidence as well, so I'm thinking of revealing it when the first son of Apeto reaches out. The Crown Prince will no longer be able to meddle with the Apeto family. A

deep rift will surely form between the Diarca and Apeto families. I'm curious to see how it feels to fall into a pit he dug himself."

"That's a relief."

The words slipped out before he had a chance to process them. Yuder was momentarily taken aback, but soon lowered his eyes and mumbled it again.

"Truly... it's a relief."

Kishiar's lonely figure at the final day of the Harvest Festival party, amidst numerous murmurings, floated into his mind. Despite being clad in the most magnificent ceremonial attire and exuding an even more radiant sense of dignity, Kishiar looked lonely amid the malice and rumors surrounding him.

Yuder knew he was not the type to be fazed by such matters. However, he simply couldn't forget the scarred figure that seemed to bear a raging storm all alone that day.

'So I thought I needed to find out where the Crown Prince Katchian got his poison...'

The unfolding events had kept him so busy that he was a step too late. But his heart was rather warmed. Kishiar was set to demonstrate, clearly and by his own strength, that he wouldn't laugh off the malice and humiliation he faced like before.

Even based solely on the incident at Lenore's funeral, it was impossible for Aishes Shan Apeto, or the Duke of Apeto, to trust the Crown Prince and the Diarca family as before. No matter how much the Diarca family claimed this incident was perpetrated solely by the Crown Prince, who would take them at their word? The fracture between the Crown Prince and the Diarca family was bound to widen further.

Adding the new evidence to this, at least until the end of Apeto's trial, they were certain that they wouldn't join hands to help each other.

'Kishiar and the Emperor will exploit this gap, manipulating Aishes to steer the trial's outcome favorably.'

Even if Aishes quickly took over the crumbling Apeto as he wished, there was no guarantee things would turn out as he hoped. After all, Kishiar wasn't the only one with keen eyes to seize the opportunity to strike at a tiger that had lost its claws and teeth.

'Besides, even if Aishes becomes a Duke in this life, if his health is no better than before, perhaps this time too...'

He still didn't know how Kishiar planned to hunt down Aishes. However, Yuder knew that Aishes would die of illness within a year. Despite thorough investigations into the possibility of assassination in his previous life, there was no doubt he had died from illness.

Although Lenore died earlier this time, Aishes probably wouldn't be able to enjoy the ease of victory for long.

He suddenly wondered if Aishes Shand Apeto's eagerness to topple his father and seize the family power sooner, despite already having a firm place as the successor, might be partly due to his health condition.

"When do you think the first son of Apeto will contact us, Commander?"

"He should arrive soon. Definitely before the trial begins."

A calmness, akin to a predator patiently waiting for its prey, shrouded Kishiar's face, which was filled with certainty.

"This mushroom will be a good gift for him then."

Kishiar closed the lid of the box containing the mushroom. The smell of the mushroom, tickling the nose like dry dust, soon vanished.

"If he comes, you, Yuder, should be behind me this time. Look forward to it."

"Understood."

"And the second thing is..."

Kishiar slowly placed his hand on the lid of the second box. Unlike the first time, there seemed to be a slight hesitation in his manner, causing Yuder to feel puzzled.

'If the mushrooms in the first box were brought by the Knights of Peletta, then the second must have come from the Imperial Mage's office.'

"Here it is."

Finally, his finger, which had been circling over the lid, grasped it tightly as if making a decision and twisted it open. What was revealed from inside the box was a red potion, sloshing within a small glass bottle.

'...Medicine?'

"As you can see, it's medicine."

Kishiar spoke, as if answering Yuder's puzzled gaze.

"What is the medicine for?"

"It's medicine for me to drink."

"Excuse me?"

"It's part of the same context as the previous conversation about vessels."

Kishiar's finger touched the medicine bottle. A brutal mix of apathy and loathing flitted across his eyes that had been absent-mindedly staring off.

"Regardless of how well I manage the opposing energies that share one body, even siphoning off a bit daily, a human body is bound to change as long as it lives. After a certain period of time, the energy in the vessel swells as if it will overflow. Just like the inevitability of winter, no matter how hard we prepare."

"And if it swells... what happens?"

"As I said before, if left alone, the vessel holding the body breaks. It will also break if you try to use all the energy at once."

Kishiar, who had danced around saying the word "die", furrowed his eyebrows.

"So, I regularly take this medicine that helps forcibly discharge energy before it completely overflows."

"Before my awakening, it was once every three months," Kishiar murmured, holding up the medicine bottle. The liquid inside, a lighter hue than blood, seemed ominously foreboding.

"After my awakening, even when the energies entangle and overflow, I've come to believe that I won't die. Still, it's dangerous not to properly discharge it. Not so much for me, but for those around me."

He didn't specify what was dangerous, but Yuder felt like he could guess at the answer Kishiar had omitted.

'...Does he fall into a rampaging state?'

Even without multiple powers like Kishiar, there were cases amongst the Awakeners where they overused their abilities, which exceeded what their bodies could bear, and they ended up rampaging and dying. If they survived, they'd gain enormous power, incomparable to before, but if they couldn't endure, the result was either death or a state worse than death.

Wasn't that the reason why he had been constantly worrying that Kanna might not awaken this time?

Kishiar looked down at the potion in his hand, his expression impassive, seemingly confirming Yuder's guess.

"This is the second time I've gotten this after my awakening. You should be careful for a while, too. You're the one who needs to be around me the most, besides Nathan."

It seemed that this was the real reason he had called for Yuder today. Yuder hesitated for a moment, quieting his complex thoughts, and opened his mouth.

"I understand. I will ask Zuckerman about what to be careful of when serving."

"That's right. I told him to answer any questions you might have."

From his answer, Yuder felt a clear determination not to put even a shallow wall between them. How many in this world would willingly offer trust to their subordinates?

'In this situation, it's no wonder Zuckerman is wary of me.'

Suppressing his churning emotions, Yuder changed the subject.

"Then, Commander... If you take the medicine well, will you continue to be okay?"

"I suppose that may be the case for now."

What did he mean by 'for now'? Did it mean that in the past, the medicine had been of little use? Leaning his head at the words containing a seed of strange anxiety, Kishiar lifted the corner of his mouth faintly.

"It's a headache, this body. Isn't this the case of anything becoming poison when taken in excess? The problem is that I can't withstand the overflowing power."

"..."

"But it's okay since I didn't die. I'm already tiredly familiar with controlling and constantly releasing power, calculating whether it will be a burden or not. In fact, I've been quite lucky."

Just as he was about to think it was fortunate, he remembered that Kishiar had once said that the Emperor already had cracks in his vessel. Kishiar had said that he nearly died due to his vessel in the past, but became alright after awakening.

'If he hadn't awakened...'

At that point, Yuder abruptly stopped the thought crossing his mind. The words he had not properly linked in thought until now suddenly connected in a strange sensation, leaving his mind cold.

The identical symptoms that the Emperor and Kishiar experienced. The same problem. The vessel. The Imperial Mage's Office closely linked with the Imperial Family. The medicine in his hand.

And the peculiar information about the Imperial Family that Enon had shown him before.

Taking a small breath, Yuder alternately looked at the medicine in Kishiar's hand and his face. Kishiar slightly tilted his head.

"Why. Do you have any questions?"

"...I apologize. May I ask a somewhat disrespectful question about the Imperial Family?"

"I permit it. Go ahead."

A light permission was given. The red eyes looking at Yuder seemed peaceful, as if they already knew what he would ask.

"Are the only ones experiencing this problem... the Commander and His Majesty?"

Kishiar smiled. His lips slowly parted.

"No."

"..."

"Yuder Aile. Do you remember the story of the 'Blood of Blessing' who was said to be passed down in the Apeto family?"

It was something Revlin Shand Apeto had told him when he had visited the Apeto family. Kishiar, who brought up the somewhat odd story of the weak children being born generation after generation and being ironically called 'blessed,' had a deeper smile on his lips.

"It was a familiar story to me. The Imperial Family expressed a similar thing as Princes who inherit the title of Duke while retaining the surname 'La Orr'."

Information about the Dukes with the surname of La Orr flashed through Yuder's mind.

Chapter 198

There were a total of ten individuals who held the surname 'La Orr' in the Orr Empire, excluding Kishiar. Enon had told him that six among them had emerged over the past 300 years. None of them, apart from Kishiar, had shown themselves much to the world before their death, and only a few portraits of them remained. The first thought that crossed his mind upon hearing this was, what?

In truth, he had committed the sacrilege of wondering if there was something wrong with the imperial bloodline.

"Do you guess what I mean? To put it exactly, this is an old problem related to 'blood'."

And now, his sacrilegious speculation had become reality, straight from his own mouth.

"Yuder, how much do you know about the First Emperor who founded the Orr Empire?"

"He was born with the blood of the Sun God, received blessings as such, was the greatest swordmaster in history, and was friends with countless heroes..."

As Yuder began to recite in a low voice the explanation he heard every Founding Day about the First Emperor, Kishiar cut him off in the middle. "That's right. Everyone knows that story," he interjected.

"The Emperor could use divine power and sword aura. And the Empress was a mage. They had five children, four of whom became the ancestors of the current four Duke houses. In other words, they all share the same origin."

Kishiar continued calmly with his explanation.

The Imperial family and the four duke houses, both sprung from the same parents as siblings, originally didn't intermarry. However, as generations passed, the situation gradually changed.

Who first felt the need to break the taboo and extend a hand was now impossible to know. The important thing was that one of the best ways to achieve political objectives, then and now, was through marriage.

Human greed revived the fading bloodline. Then something surprising happened. It was revealed that the likelihood of children displaying strong traits of the superior bloodline, which had been gradually fading, was higher when descendants sharing the blood of the First Emperor intermarried.

Feeling the need to preserve the constant 'blood of the god' for governance, the Imperial family began to continuously marry within the four duke houses. What started out of necessity soon became a tradition, which exerted an influence stronger than law.

Even during times of bad relations between the Imperial family and the Dukes, the Emperor's spouse was always chosen from within this circle. For the Duke family, producing the Emperor's spouse was also the best way to maintain their power. The Duke's family had more freedom to marry other noble families, but they often chose to marry within the four Duke houses.

And the bloodline, having grown excessively pure, began to change gradually as time went by.

"Desiring the blood of the god even against natural law, we started to breed monsters."

At the word "monsters" casually thrown out, a sarcastic smile appeared at the corners of Kishiar's mouth.

"About 800 years ago, a certain Crown Prince, who was born with excellent abilities, died just before his coronation. History records it as a tragic explosion accident that occurred in the Imperial Mage's office, but in reality, his vessel, unable to withstand his overly inflated abilities, shattered all at once. It was a horrifying death, with his physical body bursting and no remains to be found."

The Imperial family was taken aback when they discovered the cause not long after. But they agreed that they could not abandon the effort to preserve the blood of God. Fortunately, there were no more unfortunate cases of individuals who were born with too powerful abilities for their bodies to handle and consequently died for a long time.

Every hundred years or so, when such individuals appeared, the Imperial family would hurriedly strip them of their legitimate inheritance rights and send them far away after awarding them the empty title of Duke. The first 'La Orr' surname was a grand gift an Emperor gave to his beloved but power-hungry Prince. However, this changed afterward.

The individuals banished did not even have the chance to mourn their lost power and family before their vessels began to crack, all suffering in agony until they all died before they reached the age of thirty. It was a horrifying death, when the life force was drained to its limit and the remaining power in the body exploded once the limit was reached.

"They must have realized they could not leave them in the palace or anywhere visible, even knowing they were going to die in that manner. For safety reasons."

It was more crucial to protect the many who lived, rather than the few failures, as brutal as it might sound. The truth was easily concealed just by not recording it in history.

Naturally, as the cycles repeated, the problems became more severe without getting better. Around 300 years ago, the Imperial family started selecting spouses from among the ducal families, finally recognizing the severity of the issue. Yet, even excluding the Princes and Emperors who became Dukes while bearing the surname 'La Orr', many princes and emperors died mysteriously young, one after the other.

Meanwhile, as the Imperial family started to thin, the four ducal houses realized they also shared the Imperial blood. From then on, the nobles, including the ducal houses, began to actively oppose the Imperial family. All blinded by the ambition of taking over the next imperial lineage when the Imperial family disappeared.

Eventually, in this era, the turmoil reached its peak when it was publicly revealed that the current Emperor, Keilusa, had become infertile due to a crack in his vessel.

The Diarca ducal house, successful in installing Katchian as the Crown Prince, became the winner, and the surface conflict subsided. However, a new variable arose.

Kishiar 'La Orr' became an Awakener.

"I am not proud of it, but I am confident that there is likely no one who has delved as deeply into this issue as I have. I searched every record I could obtain, including the imperial family tree. In the end, I could not find a solution. However, I am just glad that I am alive and approaching the age of thirty."

Yuder felt as if he had a glimpse into the relentless effort Kishiar must have put into solving this issue from the cold, yet calm explanation. He was a stubborn man who had striven for an unimaginably long time to resolve his own body's issue.

The ambitious man hidden behind the playful Duke of Peletta, who had become an Awakener by chance and built the Cavalry, drove his weakening body to pursue a big goal without giving up. He couldn't even guess where the source of such a tremendous will came from.

He wondered if Kishiar had shared these thoughts in his previous life.

Could he have avoided resentment or doubt in those moments when Kishiar silently pushed him away and did not deny suspicions of rebellion, if he had known then? Could he have asked for more words, instead of remaining silent on those days when Kishiar suddenly visited and spent the night?

Yuder Aile reexamined moments he thought he had no regrets about. It felt odd. Too strange, in fact, that a twisting sensation gripped his stomach.

"...I'm not sure if I'm the one who should be hearing this story."

When Yuder grumbled with a furrowed face, a smile formed on Kishiar's.

"Are you saying that now, after hearing it all?"

"That's what I think, now that I've heard it all."

Having said that, Yuder hesitated for a moment. He took a deep breath and added with difficulty.

"I appreciate your trust... but you don't have to go to the extent of enduring discomfort to tell me this. I don't ask for such things."

It was ironic. He heard directly from the man himself a story that he had previously requested Enon to investigate out of necessity, but it didn't feel satisfying or heartening at all.

Could it be because of the look Kishiar had during the entire story? Maybe he was bothered by the fact that his question made Kishiar look full of sarcasm, unable to hide his disgust.

"Oh dear. Did I look uncomfortable? I wish you wouldn't think that way."

A playful retort was followed by a captivating gaze.

"It's just necessary information for the future, information. I did it because I deemed it to be alright. Trust is inherently something to be poured unilaterally. What's an old story when it's about holding on to such a charming existence?"

Despite the sight of Yuder's bizarre facial expression, Kishiar did not stop speaking.

"Anyone who learns about you would feel the same way."

"Shouldn't you be saying that to other people, not me?"

As he turned his gaze and responded, a languid reply came back.

"Other people? Who are you talking about?"

Whoever it was, he just wished that he wasn't the only one who heard Kishiar's words about being a charming existence. Kishiar laughed softly, looking at the silent Yuder.

"It's sad that my sincerity doesn't get across when all I want and think about now is you."

"...Isn't it because of the effects of the second gender manifestation that you're thinking this way, like you mentioned before?"

"I've thought about that issue. If it were, this conversation would have taken place in bed by now."

So, it meant that this was a continuation of completely natural feelings that had been ongoing since before. Kishiar, who made such a tremendous remark as if it was nothing, sent a smirk toward Yuder, who had closed his mouth.

"I've always liked you from the beginning. Isn't that right?"

"..."

"As an assistant who's so cold yet charming, I, a Commander whose only merit is his face, ought to at least be honest."

"What I said back then was a slip of the tongue."

"A slip of the tongue, you say. Does that mean you think I'm not good-looking?"

"Why are you twisting the story? That's not what I meant."

"This is disappointing. Who else could one think handsome if not me? Could it be the living rose of our group, Gakane Bolunwald? Or maybe that pharmacist from the medical division who seems to be quite friendly with you? Either way, it's really going to hurt my pride. Answer carefully."

He had heard of this Enon before, but what on earth was this new, unheard-of nickname for Gakane? The more they conversed, the more he felt like he was being swallowed by a large snake, but he had no choice. Gritting his teeth, Yuder lowered his head and mustered the strength to spit out his words.

"I think you're handsome. But..."

"Who?"

"...You, Commander."

Chapter 199

It was a difficult admission to make, but given Kishiar's earnest expression, there was little choice. A sense of guilt subtly brushed his mind, prompting the question: why had he made such a response last time, leading to this situation?

"However, I don't believe that's the whole story."

"Hmm?"

Kishiar raised one eyebrow.

"Regardless of how Gakane or Enon look, you are still the Commander, are you not?"

"Enon? Ah, that was the name of the pharmacist, right?"

The topic had suddenly taken a sharp turn.

"Yes."

"It seems you're quite close, calling him by his first name. How did you come to have such a close relationship with this pharmacist? Did you know him even before you joined the Cavalry?"

Hearing such an intrusive question after discussing his most private affairs was inevitably uncomfortable, even for Yuder Aile. It was suddenly apparent that while Kishiar was tearing down walls, Yuder found himself needing to build new ones in response.

And so, he had to maintain a certain distance somehow.

Yuder kept silent for a moment, trying to maintain his composure as much as possible before he spoke.

"That's correct. Before joining the Cavalry, I happened to receive some help from him."

"Help?"

"Well, the important point isn't that."

"No, isn't that in fact a significant detail? You, my assistant, have received help. I'm curious, would you explain more?"

His attempt to change the topic failed immediately. Yuder pondered his response during a brief moment of silence. Telling a complete lie would be difficult. However, telling the whole truth was also out of the question. He was belatedly hit with regret for not reporting Enon's entry beforehand.

'No helping it.'

The easiest thing to do was to mix truth with falsehood. Yuder decided to talk about his encounter with Enon from his previous life, not the current one.

"Before I joined the Cavalry... I happened to get injured. I met him by chance and received treatment, and that's how we became acquainted."

Kishiar was silent, seemingly surprised by the unexpected statement.

"He was a stranger who didn't hesitate to help me, so I visited him a few times to express my gratitude. I was surprised when I found out he joined the Cavalry... but please don't doubt Enon's abilities or background because of me."

"Indeed."

Kishiar murmured, his fingers gently twitching on his armrest.

"So that's the connection that made you so defensive when I mentioned him."

Had he read the signs of tension in that short interval? As Yuder froze, unable to respond, a slow smile spread across Kishiar's face.

"I've already done a considerable investigation into that pharmacist before bringing him in, so I'm not suspicious of him. He was well known within the Seventh Wall for his generosity and wisdom. He spent a long time by the side of the poorest among us, so they say."

The story of Enon that flowed from Kishiar's lips was unfamiliar. It made sense since they hadn't had any interaction in their previous lives, yet here they were talking about each other.

"I wondered why a man with his own shop would suddenly want to join our group... So, it was because of your connection after all."

The guess about the direction had been slightly off, but the cause was spot on. After all, it was true that Enon had mentioned coming close to observe Yuder. The sharp perception of Kishiar had crossed the boundary of surprise, causing goosebumps, yet Yuder tried to maintain his calmness.

"That is..."

"No. You don't need to explain further."

What could possibly come next? When he was preparing his mind to react without surprise to any statement, a laughter that shattered the covert tension suddenly cut through the air.

"Don't be so tense. It feels like you might get jealous."

"Excuse me?"

"I was merely asking out of curiosity. Isn't it a natural human tendency to want to know more about a subject of interest?"

The tension vanished in an instant. Yuder blinked his eyes, exhaled softly, and nodded his head.

"I understand..."

"I'm a bit disappointed. Despite my shown interest and open doors, you seem to have no trust in me. What more should I do if this isn't enough?"

Yuder sighed, bowing his head.

"You don't have to do anything more. I believe you."

"You believe me?"

"Yes."

"Then, could you tell me what you think about my interest?"

This question was even more intense than when he had suspected Enon. Yuder averted his eyes, looking at the two trophies on the table, and spoke with difficulty.

"...You mentioned it was a natural interest, but others may misunderstand. It might be better if you restrain your words in front of others."

"Is that all?"

"I always think about what I can do to respond to the trust you place in me. I worry because it seems like you feel I'm not returning as much as you desire."

Kishiar frowned and smirked suspiciously.

"Is that all?"

"What more should I say?"

"I thought you quite liked me, too. What about that part?"

A sudden surge stirred within Yuder's chest. He unwittingly recalled the feelings he had felt for Kishiar in the past, but quickly suppressed them and responded.

"Of course, I respect you. I wish to aid you in your endeavors."

Kishiar's gaze became even more peculiar. After a moment, he let out a long sigh and deeply slouched into the couch.

"Yuder Aile."

"Yes."

"Take off your glove and give me your hand."

At the sudden command, Yuder hesitated momentarily but eventually removed his right glove. The spot on the back of his hand from trying to block the blind fire in training earlier hadn't spread much. Kishiar examined his bare hand and asked softly.

"Did you exert yourself today?"

"I used a bit of strength blocking an attack during training."

"Any pain?"

"No."

"Good. That's fortunate."

Kishiar held out his hand, clasping Yuder's fingers and guiding them. His right hand, enveloped perfectly within the large, smooth hand, felt oddly tingling.

'...Why isn't he doing anything?'

He thought Kishiar was about to treat him, but he did nothing. In the silence, the connection between their hands grew progressively more electric. Yuder, feeling sweat beginning to pool in his palm, slowly raised his gaze.

And then, his gaze met with the steady, unblinking red eyes that seemed to be observing his reaction.

"Ah..."

A numbing sensation spread from his fingertips, causing his body to tremble. The hand he touched with Kishiar heated up. An intense sensation that was difficult to explain in words overtook his mind.

'Just like that time.'

The feeling was similar to when their hands accidentally touched in the carriage. His gaze swirled dizzily in the collision of heat and impulse. Despite his resistance against the suction that seemed to draw him in, it was in vain. Unconsciously, Yuder reached out, wanting to touch Kishiar's face, overwhelmed by an impulsive desire.

Golden eyelashes. Eyes beneath them like transparent flames. Hair covering the forehead that was gently furrowed. Slightly parted lips that seemed to desire to consume something.

Strangely, he could feel it.

The sweet desire that the existence before him seemed to feel as intensely as hunger. This feeling was just like Yuder's, perhaps even stronger. His target of desire, to pull him in and hold him, was none other than...

"Please, let go."

After being lost in sensation for a while, Yuder quickly drew back his hand as if it had touched fire.

'What the hell.'

His breathing became heavy. The fact that he had not even noticed his breathing change was a bit shocking. Kishiar silently looked at the empty hand that had retreated.

"How do you feel?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you not feel anything?"

"..."

He couldn't deny it since he had already felt the same sensation. The strange attraction was so strong that for the first time, Yuder Ail, who was fearless, wanted to push it away first.

The temptation to lean into the intoxicatingly sweet sensation, the heat that seemed to whisper that it was natural, like the flames of hell itself.

Despite pushing it away, his now cooled hand felt a strange regret. The fact that he was feeling regret was unfamiliar.

"What kind of response are you expecting?"

Confused mumbles flowed between his lips.

"It's not just me."

Kishiar replied.

"Aren't you also attracted to me?"

Thump. His heart pounded as if on the day of his manifestation. Yuder, before understanding what it was, promptly stood up from his place.

"I will take my leave now."

"Are you leaving like that? Without receiving any treatment."

"I will receive it from Priest Lusan."

"Well. That can work too."

After saying this, Kishiar picked up the gloves he had placed on the table and smiled.

"You should put these back on."

"..."

Without a word, Yuder took the gloves from his hand. As he was putting on the gloves again, Kishiar too, rose from his seat. His movements were so leisurely that it gave the illusion of a large beast getting up. Yuder silently bowed his head towards him in greeting.

"Yuder."

But before he could take a few steps, a slow, sinking voice came from behind him.

His steps halted as if a leash had suddenly caught hold of a dog.

"Am I still as scary as back then?"

"...No."

After a moment of hesitation, Yuder barely managed to open his mouth and reply.

Chapter 200

"So, it appears you're afraid of something else."

He had just managed to reach the doorknob when he was halted again by an unexpected voice that resonated in his ear. Yuder barely managed to suppress the urge to turn his head. Even at this moment, the force compelling him was vehemently whispering that he should look back.

"Well, no matter. As I've said before, I enjoy breaking through walls..."

He felt the slow approach of footsteps. He thought he should step forward to avoid him, but his feet remained unmoving, as though they were stuck to the ground.

And finally, Kishiar came to a halt right behind him.

"Different times are needed to reach certainty, after all."

Through the light streaming in from the window, Yuder saw his own shadow being completely overlaid by Kishiar's tall form. Their two small shadows on the dark blue door intertwined and stretched out, merging into a single, dark mass. The sight was obscenely strange. The door lay before him, Kishiar behind him. Trapped in between, his mouth grew dry.

To clear his spinning head, Yuder clenched his fists and closed then opened his eyes.

This was merely an extension of the impulses formed due to their overly intense influence on each other during his second gender manifestation. As time passed, this would surely fade, and they could laugh and converse as if it had never happened. It was nothing.

This trembling and heat he felt now would be forgotten later.

'What's important are the tasks ahead, not this.'

‘But what if it wasn't?’

A snake-like voice whispered in his heart.

‘Can you truly guarantee it will become nothing, Yuder Aile?’

Kishiar made it clear that he had no intention of backing down until he achieved what he wanted. He was originally a genius at methodically manipulating and releasing his targets until he achieved his goal. If such a person continuously pushed, could Yuder Aile truly resist and refuse him to the end?

'...I probably can't.'

The answer came very simply.

Running away right now was possible. He had always managed to evade this way so far. But every time he backed down from Kishiar, each subsequent confrontation resulted in an even more intense pull, striking him like a punishment.

As long as the flame he had already felt did not extinguish, it was impossible to escape from this impulse. His instincts made that decision.

'I was too naive.'

Yuder began to regret thinking it would be so easy to stand by Kishiar's side to protect him. He had thought that he wouldn't feel anything upon meeting him again due to the emotions from his past life fading. But it wasn't so.

The man he met again was much more vivid and human than the faint figure in his memories, so charming that it would be strange not to be drawn to him. Yuder realized the fact that he could feel such overwhelming emotions towards someone other than himself only when he met him again by rewinding time.

The emotions awakened by Kishiar La Orr were all things that Yuder Aile hadn't even thought could exist within him.

Neither of them was in heat, and their second gender manifestation had long passed. Yet, this moment by his side felt different in every way from being with anyone else. It felt as though all the desires he had been striving not to acknowledge were abruptly flipped over, revealing their bare, bright red faces.

Frankly, he wasn't sure how long he could resist.

If things continued this way, he would undoubtedly lose control of his body, his emotions. The fact that he knew this frightened him.

"When we touch. When we're conversing."

A hand approached Yuder's silent shoulder, gently touching the door as if to interrupt his train of thought.

"Sometimes, I feel like you're the only one in this world who is like me.

Kishiar's breath tickled the back of his neck. At the same time, the shadows overlapping the door blurred.

"I feel a relief, a profound liberation that I hadn't experienced before. It's a sweet and pleasurable sensation."

Yuder exhaled thinly, feeling the sensation of Kishiar's hair on his shoulder tickling the back of his neck as though it was a distant sensation.

"I find it amusing to contemplate how much I can show you. I'm looking forward to the next part. And sometimes, I find myself parched with desire, wanting more."

"..."

"Am I the only one who feels this?"

Could he say that he wasn't captivated by him?'"

Yuder loosened the tense gaze that he had kept on the closed door and the hand resting upon it. A deep sigh naturally slipped out.

'Damn it.'

Would it have been better if all he wanted was his body, just a primal urge, just like in his past life?

How could one make a cold judgment after hearing such words? The heat began to rise again in his head, which he thought he had barely managed to cool down.

‘Turn around. Turn around now. You want to see it, don't you? How could you resist the opportunity to touch something so captivating?’ The urge continuously prickled beneath his skin, clouding his mind.

"...I think, this is wrong."

At the words he barely managed to spit out, the weight of the head resting on his shoulder felt a little heavier. Yuder endured that weight, murmuring very quietly and slowly.

"That's why, even though I think I should leave..."

"..."

"It's difficult. I..."

"Then try leaving."

A brief phrase that wasn't an order whispered with a hotter heat than ever before.

"It's okay if you don't confirm right now. If you leave, I'll let you go immediately. But if you turn around now."

The force from Kishiar's fingers resting above the door increased. A low voice gently covered his ear, enticing him.

"Then, I'll kiss you according to my conviction."

A shocking shiver ran down his spine. The moment he turned around, he couldn't tell if it was out of surprise or because he wanted to confirm the face of Kishiar who had uttered those words.

All he knew was that his head turned unconsciously, and at that moment, the predator who had been waiting pounced as he had forewarned.

Ah.

A faint exclamation echoed in his head before fading away.

His mind faded in and out in the ensuing silence. When he regained his senses, Yuder found himself trapped between the door and Kishiar, embraced at the waist by one hand, receiving his kiss.

'It's hot.'

Their overlapped lips were so hot that it felt as if he had been burned. The breath he exhaled, the breath he inhaled, all were stolen by the massive serpent of a man in front of him. He wondered if the mixed heat was turning his head to mush, but such thoughts were sucked into the descending lips and disappeared almost immediately.

Had he ever kissed him like this before?

He wasn't sure. The pains of his previous life that always unsettled his heart weren't coming to mind at all right now.

All that could be felt was a firm hand encircling his waist and the sensation of the stiff door against his back. His crimson eyes brimmed with a savage joy as if he'd finally obtained the thing he coveted most.

And within that joy was his own reflection, equally consumed by a ruthless desire, his mind solely focused on satiating his hunger as he clung to his neck.

"Hey, Yuder! Snap out of it."

At the sharp summons, Yuder, about to naturally drop his cup into the soup bowl, caught it just in time and placed it back on the table.

"Couldn't sleep last night? What's up?"

Devran, whom he'd run into at the dining hall, studied Yuder's complexion suspiciously as if expecting some kind of mishap.

"Nothing's wrong. Just lost in thought."

"Your lips look awfully chapped. Are you sure nothing's wrong?"

"..."

Instead of replying, Yuder raised his hand to touch his lips. He could feel a faint stinging pain indeed.

"If you're tired, there's no need to supervise the others' training. You should take a break. You're such a workaholic. Who else would have let pass an opportunity to rest for two weeks after the manifestation?"

He wasn't tired. That was the truth. But he couldn't tell Devran the real reason behind his chapped lips, so Yuder wordlessly swallowed a spoonful of soup. His mouth felt unusually sensitive, subtle sensations making themselves felt from all corners.

These unfamiliar sensations reminded him of the incident the previous day, making his mood even stranger. He ended up eating far less than usual and concluded his meal.

"Are you really not going to the medical division?"

"No need."

As he dismissed Devran's concern with a shake of his head, the latter scrunched his brow in disapproval.

"So, there's only one reason, after all."

"..."

"If this is because of the trial of the Apeto, stop worrying so much. Father and Dermilla, who've come up to the capital, are fine. Why should we fret? You appear unaffected, but you're pretty sentimental, after all."

Yuder wondered if Devran had detected something, but apparently not. Devran, confident in his misinterpretation, began an unending monologue about the Hartan people who'd come up to the capital to answer the summons of Kishiar, their families, and the upcoming second trial, patting Yuder's back all the while.

"Everyone was extremely tense the first time. But after witnessing the ruckus once, everyone's anger seems to have given them energy. They're all set to testify every detail of the events from that time, whatever happens this time."

"...That's good."

"It's all thanks to the Commander. Who else but him could provide such a prestigious mansion as a safehouse for all those people to rest without attracting attention?"

On the day of the first trial, Yuder, occupied with the manifestation, had stayed in the palace and hadn't heard properly about those who'd come up to testify. But judging by Devran's reaction, it seemed like Kishiar had taken care of their protection and preparation for the trial.

"Even if the second prince of Apeto is dead, we haven't forgotten a thing. We're definitely going to see those bastards fall."

"So cheer up!"

With these off-target words of comfort, Devran left the dining hall in high spirits. Yuder watched his retreating figure, let out a small sigh, and turned his gaze toward the window. The sky was clear, and the sound of the members training outside was peaceful.

Today, the only thing out of the ordinary here seemed to be Yuder Aile.