

Turning 221

Chapter 221

"There's nothing we can do for now. When my apprentice returns, let's look more closely at what we've recently discovered. We've stumbled upon something quite intriguing."

Not long after, Thais's apprentice, Alik, appeared, his arms full of various items.

"Oh, Yuder, when did you arrive?"

"I've just arrived."

"For now, set those things down and come over here, Alik."

Upon hearing his master's command, Alik approached, and Thais Yulman picked up one of the mediums laid out in front of him and handed it to his apprentice.

"Now, Yuder, observe closely. This is a phenomenon that Alik coincidentally discovered while he was practicing his awakened abilities, with the medium in hand."

Upon hearing his master's words, Alik seemed to instantly comprehend what he needed to do. Clutching the medium tightly, he began to channel energy. Yuder, watching the energy swirl around over the back of Alik's hand like a whirlwind, narrowed his eyes and focused intently.

The energy spread like mist, and tiny droplets began to form in the air, just as they usually did. But the situation changed when a red light began to flicker from within the medium Alik was clutching.

The droplets, which were barely distinguishable from the mist, suddenly began to swell with a strange noise. In no time, they transformed into water droplets as large as fists. In the blink of an eye, the area around the three men was filled with numerous large water droplets.

"What in the..."

"Ugh, master. I'm already straining so much..."

"Alright, you can dispel it now."

At his master's permission, all the water droplets vanished at once, and the red glow from within the medium faded. Alik, gasping for breath, collapsed onto a seat.

"Even though it was just a few seconds, it was really exhausting. But you saw it properly, right?"

"What exactly just happened?"

At Yuder's question, the old mage stroked his beard with a confident smile.

"It's absorption and amplification!"

'Absorption and amplification?'

Asking for more explanation with his gaze, Alik started to speak.

"Do you remember when I explained the principle of magic tools?"

"Yes, I do."

Yuder recalled the principles of magic tools he had learned from their past encounters.

"The user's magical power is sucked in a fixed amount, then a predefined magic is spat out.'

"This medium doesn't contain any laws, so normally, it shouldn't output anything. But when an Awakener's power manifests while in contact with it, the medium immediately absorbs that power and outputs the same result with greater amplification. So, this might be evidence supporting the hypothesis that the master once proposed."

"The hypothesis you mentioned is..."

"The hypothesis that the power of the Red Stone changes a person's body and the more exposure, the stronger the power that might come out."

"So, I tried to see if I could absorb that power into my body, but so far, I can only amplify and output it, I can't absorb it from here."

Thais Yulman added with a regretful expression.

"Alik seemed quite strained. Can't you control the energy that is being absorbed?"

"Well... I'm not sure if it's because I haven't been awakened for long, but it does feel difficult."

Alik responded, wiping his sweat.

"The sensation at the moment of amplification feels as if the medium is sucking all the power from my body."

"Still, the more I try, the longer I can endure. At first, I couldn't hold on for even a second, but now I'm holding on for a significant amount of time. This also lends some weight to the hypothesis."

Listening to the explanation of Thais Yulman, who lovingly gazed at the accumulated mediums, Yuder picked up a medium and brought it close to his face to inspect. The moment the medium landed in his hand, two mages stiffened in surprise, but nothing happened as he didn't exert any force. He ignored their reactions and quietly opened his mouth.

"So, if I grip this and exert force, will the power of the Red Stone inside diminish?"

"Ah, yes. It should. It's hard to measure, but theoretically..."

Alik began to explain, but once again the lengthy conversation filled with numbers and magic jargon made Yuder tune out.

"I'm tempted to try it myself."

"Don't do it here. If something goes wrong again, this time the Commander might seriously kick us out."

Thais Yulman had completely retracted his previously condescending gaze towards the young Duke since he was scolded by Kishiar. He realized that Kishiar's permission was crucial to continue his research.

Yet, as a persistent mage, he carefully added to Yuder,

"But it might be alright to try it once in the training ground at dawn when no one is around."

"Hmm... I'll consider it."

"Good. If you really want to try, be sure to call me."

Yuder looked down at his own hand. The spots on the inside of his gloved hand had barely hurt since he went through the second gender manifestation and the incident in the basement. It still spread a bit when he used force, but the color had faded significantly and was easily cured when he received divine power from Lusan.

Enon suggested that it might be the process of his body becoming accustomed and normalized to the power of the Red Stone that had seeped in through his hand like poison. He thought that Enon's hypothesis and the experiments of the mages he saw today seemed to coincide in some ways, but he still couldn't be certain.

'I don't worry too much about this western dispatch mission now that my hand is fine, but I shouldn't let my guard down as the situation can change.'

Yuder resolved to test this amplifying effect at least once before heading west. Luckily, he always carried one medium with him. It seemed like the day had finally come to take a good look at the one that Kishiar had given him as a gift.

'If it's useful, I might consider bringing a few to the west.'

The thought might have shocked Thais Yulman, who lamented that Kishiar had taken away a significant amount of the produced mediums, but Yuder calmly planned his future.

"Well, I should get going now."

"You're leaving already? I wanted to show you my newly conceived water power application method..."

Alik managed to muster up some energy and stood up, looking disappointed.

"I have to prepare for a departure soon."

"Ah. You're leaving for some monster subjugation mission, right? I completely forgot even after reading the letter from the Commander! So, where are you headed?"

"I'm headed west."

"The west, hmm. Do you know exactly where you are going?"

"No, it seems I'll be traveling to several places."

Then, after cocking his head as if deep in thought, Thais burst into a smile and clapped his hands.

"Come to think of it, is this the Cavalry's first monster subjugation mission?"

"Yes."

"That must be nerve-wracking. I remember shaking in my boots when I first encountered a monster in the Pearl Tower. Not being able to use attribute magic was terrifying. But thanks to the magic tools I'd made, they proved quite useful... enough to flatten the noses of those snooty Red Wolves Tower guys..."

After going on for quite a while about his youthful exploits, Thais made a subtle proposal with a cunning smile.

"Yuder, would you mind if I wrote a letter for you?"

It turned out that the letter Thais was offering was something akin to a letter of introduction.

"I may be old, but I've known quite a few mages since my time as an Elder in the Pearl Tower. If you show this to Micalin, who heads the Western Mage Union, they won't treat you badly. He's a friend of mine."

Yuder recalled the knights and mages from his previous life, who were perpetually hostile to the Cavalry. Their conflicts had made his mission in the West more difficult. He had braced himself for a similar struggle this time, but he hadn't expected this letter. It was an unexpected boon.

"Thank you very much. This will be of great help to the Cavalry, on their first mission."

Upon receiving Yuder's unusually long thanks, Thais beamed with satisfaction.

"Of course. Always glad to help. Just make sure to tell the Commander how cooperative I was. Make sure!"

He mentioned that Micalin, the mage, was likely to be in Tainu, the home of the Tain family and also the largest city in the West. Yuder gratefully accepted the letter and left the laboratory in high spirits.

Yuder forced open his eyes that had been tightly shut.

Night had fallen, and everything before him was shrouded in darkness. His mouth was parched, and he craved a drink of water, but he couldn't hope for such a luxury here. As he felt around the straw-filled bed, trying to prop himself up, a sudden hand grabbed his shoulder, forcing him back down.

"Stay lying down."

Startled by the deep and heavy voice, he turned his head to see a familiar face. Kishiar La Orr. Even in the darkness, his golden hair and red eyes seemed to emit a faint glow. How could he not recognize them?

Yet, he hadn't expected to see this face here.

As he blankly stared up at Kishiar, the man furrowed his brows and gave a faint smile. It was a peculiar expression, more like a forced movement due to lack of any other appropriate expression, rather than a genuine smile.

A moment later, Kishiar reached for a cup he'd kept behind him. His white gloves, normally immaculate, were stained and dirty. Where had he gotten this cup, which clearly hadn't been there before? Yet, given his thirst, Yuder reached for the cup. However, he soon realized that he couldn't grasp the cup with his arm, which was entirely bandaged from shoulder to fingertips.

Their gazes met over his heavily bandaged arm. As he pondered what to do, Kishiar silently brought the cup to his lips.

"..."

Would it be okay?

Deciding to let whatever happens happen, he cautiously opened his mouth. The lukewarm water moistened his parched lips and trickled down his throat. After draining the cup in no time, he lowered his head to catch the last few droplets of water trickling down his chin. A slow question came.

"More?"

Yuder nodded. Kishiar offered him another cup. This time, having done it once already, it was easier to accept and drink. As he opened his mouth and swallowed, all the while keeping his head up, Kishiar's red gaze never once strayed from him.

Only after he'd emptied the third cup and the strength left his body did Kishiar, who seemed to have been waiting, open his mouth.

"They say you were mauled by a monster."

"..."

"Can you explain what happened?"

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"Can you explain what happened?"

To be honest, he didn't want to answer. But he had to.

Kishiar seemed prepared to stay up all night, sitting right there until Yuder spoke. It was only when the sensation of being stabbed by a sharply whetted knife reached its peak due to Yuder's silence, that he finally moved his parched lips to speak.

"It didn't work."

"Your power?"

Kishiar precisely pointed out the part Yuder had left unsaid. Yuder turned his head away, avoiding his gaze.

"...Yes."

"Not at all?"

"I could use my sword. But apart from that..."

Kishiar said nothing. He was speechless. The man who had been so confident in the power he possessed had turned out to be the most useless piece of trash at the actual scene. Anyone would find it not just laughable but pathetic. Yuder easily recalled some of the things he had heard.

'Do you even know how many got hurt just by trusting you?'

'This useless guy who can't exert any power is the Deputy Commander? How can you show your face to the Cavalry now? Surely you're not planning on sticking around?'

‘...Coming here with such an arrogant air. Serves you right!’

‘...’

As his stomach churned again, he decided to stop recalling. Rather than waiting for what might come out at the end of Kishiar's silence, Yuder decided to speak first.

“I'll step down from the scene as soon as dawn breaks, and I'll resign from my Deputy Commander position. I'll accept any further punishment you decide to give me.”

“You're going to give up your position and step away?”

Kishiar slowly questioned back.

“Why?”

A voice as parched as sand ready to blow away scratched uncomfortably at Yuder's ear. He gritted his teeth, continued avoiding Kishiar's gaze, and mumbled.

“Because over ten people were injured due to my inability to use my power. I should be rightfully punished and held accountable.”

“No one could have predicted your power wouldn't work. If we're going by that, I, who sent you, should be the one responsible and be punished.”

‘Enough of your unacceptable words! Who would accept them just because you, the Commander, said them!’

He swallowed the rough voice that had almost leaped up his throat.

“...Just punish me.”

“What kind of punishment can I give to someone whose arms are nearly severed?”

‘Are you asking me to tell you what kind of punishment I should get?’

Yuder swallowed a sigh, eyes narrowed and closed.

“Anything will do. Whip me in public or make me leave the Cavalry, please.”

That would be enough to finally quell the angry voices. Gakane, who had high respect among other members, or Ever Beck, who had proved herself this time, would make a sufficient successor.

If he was to be dismissed, he would have to return to his hometown alone... But so what? It didn't seem to matter now. If he couldn't carry his belongings with his arms, he could bite them with his mouth. And perhaps this would be a better ending for the man in front of him.

He might be able to escape from this unbearable awkwardness and weird atmosphere that always arose when they were left alone. He would soon forget the dark memory of being forced to commit an unforgivable sin...

“Are you serious, Yuder Aile?”

“Yes.”

“Look at me when you speak.”

A chilly voice gave an order. Yuder, resisting at first, managed to drag his gaze from the floor to Kishiar. His sharp, crimson gaze was staring at him without a hint of amusement.

"I... I'm serious."

He had expected him to get angry or to spout a harsh rebuke, regardless of how weak his words might have been. But, surprisingly, Kishiar didn't get angry.

"Even if you're the first Awakener, you've only been awakened for two years."

"..."

"No one knows the extent of their abilities, or what limits exist. Even I don't fully understand the weaknesses of my power."

Yuder was suddenly at a loss for words. As he stared blankly, Kishiar spoke quietly, yet heavily.

"You're just aware of it earlier than others. Consider yourself lucky."

"What do you mean?"

"There were 11 casualties in the last battle. You're the only one who was severely injured and required a priest. I heard that once you realized your power didn't work, you held your sword and fought alone until reinforcements could arrive. Am I wrong?"

"..."

Yuder clenched his teeth again. He didn't know what to say.

"But."

"Your power didn't stop working entirely, did it? Have you tested whether it still works on other targets?"

He didn't know. After the chaotic battle, he had been too busy getting treated and finding a place to rest to test such a thing. He barely managed to borrow this barn because there were no shrines nearby.

Kishiar sighed heavily as Yuder shook his head slowly. He scooped up a handful of the straw that had been covering the floor. Just as Yuder wondered what he would do with it, Kishiar quietly gave an order.

"Light a fire here."

"What?"

"A small fire will do."

Yuder was skeptical about what good it could do, but he also doubted whether he could do it. As his mixed emotions left him hesitant, a soothing voice resonated in his ear.

"It's okay, hurry."

That's right. What did it matter if he failed? They had already seen the worst of each other, so there was nothing more to lose.

As if guided, he gave up and exerted his power. Instantly, flames appeared out of nowhere. A small, crimson fire spread over the straw that Kishiar was holding.

As he looked at the easily created flame, Kishiar smiled softly. It was a different smile than when they first met.

"You can do it."

He murmured as he looked down at the pile of straw that had quickly turned to ashes. Yuder was overwhelmed by strange emotions and couldn't easily open his mouth. After a while, Kishiar, who had been looking down at the ashes on his white glove, called his name.

"Yuder Aile."

"Yes?"

"I'll give you a homework. If you solve it, we will forget about this incident and you will maintain your position."

"What homework... are you talking about?"

"Find ten ways to clean up these ashes so that they are invisible."

As he spoke, Kishiar turned over his palm. His riddle-like voice landed on the black ash piled on the floor.

"However, any direct methods that involve physical actions are to be excluded. Use only your 'power'."

"What do you mean..."

"This is your punishment. You don't need anything else."

And the moment the approaching hand covered his bewildered eyes, the engulfing darkness unfolded, and his consciousness slipped away...

"..."

Once again, Yuder opened his eyes. Only after seeing the familiar ceiling of the Cavalry quarters did he realize that what just happened was a dream from his past life. Rubbing his throbbing head, he sat up, and faintly saw the still-dark window.

Unable to fall back asleep even when he closed his eyes again, he got up and drank some water. Even though it should be no different from the water he drank in his dream, it left a bitter taste in his mouth for some unknown reason.

'I'm having some strange dreams.'

He wondered if it was because of the tension he felt, considering he was due to depart for the West soon. The vague image of Kishiar from his dream lingered in his mind.

The memories from that time remained quite vivid even now. It was a highly memorable experience, after all. It was the first time he realized that his power did not affect anything beyond what was born and grew in this world.

A few days after receiving an unfamiliar task from the belatedly arrived Kishiar, Yuder finally understood the true meaning of his words. He realized that the only way to achieve his goals was not just by burning or killing things directly as he had done before.

It didn't matter if his direct power didn't work against monsters. If their bodies decayed, they were bound to die. And Yuder had the power to move nature itself to crumble even the largest and toughest creatures.

Thanks to this, in the next battle, Yuder drove hundreds of monsters into a narrow valley with the help of others. He won a great victory by collapsing the entire cliff. Several landscapes in the West changed due to this, and it was deemed a historic battle that would be recorded in history books, helping him to earn the title of Count.

In this way, after a few appearances, Yuder hardly participated directly in battles due to intense check, but his experience from that day continued to be a great help even after he became a Commander.

Yuder looked down at his hand, lightly clenching and unclenching it. Because he didn't bother to wear gloves when sleeping alone, his palm, dotted with small spots, was clearly visible. Observing the rough fingertips scarred from various jobs he had done since childhood, he suddenly remembered the bandaged hand he saw in his dream.

'Come to think of it, that injury... It was serious, considering it now.'

He had never really thought about it before, but seeing it again in the dream, it was surprising that there were no aftereffects, given how severe the condition was. It was an injury inflicted by a monster, a natural enemy of his abilities, and until Kishiar arrived, he had only wrapped it in a bandage without receiving proper treatment. Even if it was treated later, there was a high chance of not fully recovering, yet how did it heal so cleanly?

The temples he visited afterward didn't seem to have cured him well either. They were reluctant to use the holy water that Kishiar had procured from other regions on the Cavalry members.

'Back then... Since it was the first injury, I just thought I recovered faster than others.'

After becoming a Commander, the injuries he received from dealing with monsters for similar reasons healed much slower than other injuries, and the scars did not fade easily.

"..."

Suddenly, Yuder stiffened his shoulders.

'Could it be?'

He didn't know it at the time, but there was one piece of information he had now. The fact that Kishiar could use divine power.

If his complete recovery wasn't a coincidence, the only plausible explanation was that.

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'I cannot be certain now that I can't even ask him directly...'

With just the suggestion of the possibility, a sudden chill ran through his mind. Yuder rubbed at the corners of his eyes and took a few deep breaths.

'It's pointless to think about it now. It's all in the past...'

All in the past.

Despite the truth of his words, a deep pang of something pierced somewhere in his chest. Since turning back time and returning to the past, he had never once regretted his old life. It was the same now.

But what was this feeling, this emotion?

He was in turmoil, not knowing how to describe the sensation he was currently experiencing.

Despite repeating to himself numerous times and trying to clear his mind as he sat back down on the bed, sleep eluded him. Instead of drowsiness, his mind was filled with thoughts of Kishiar, not the upcoming Western subjugation mission or thoughts about the Red Stone.

The enigmatic man whose secret he thought he'd never understand until the day he died.

The first human whose life he had taken with his own hands.

And the face he had recalled in that final moment, despite suppressing it for such a long time.

'...Maybe I should ask Enon.'

He had always considered the irregular dreams, whose reality he could not ascertain, as just that—dreams. But this time it was hard to pass off. Since Enon knew so much, wouldn't he be able to point out something Yuder missed upon hearing this story?

His face might flare up, saying, "You think I know everything?" but he had no choice. Enon was the only one who knew the story of him coming back from the future.

'It's late, but Enon usually doesn't sleep much, so he might still be awake.'

Deciding to check if the light was on in his room, right next to the medical division, and if not, to come back, he felt lighter.

However, as Yuder, who silently opened the door and stepped into the dark corridor illuminated by the moonlight, stopped in his tracks before he could take a few steps. He sensed something before he even turned his eyes.

A presence stimulating his senses beyond his five senses.

"...Commander?"

Responding to the faint call, the man who was leaning against the corridor wall slowly opened and closed his eyes. A faint smile adorned his face hidden in the darkness, his red pupils shining darkly.

"Out for a night walk?"

"Why... are you here?"

"..."

He asked, concealing his surprise, but Kishiar didn't answer. Seeing his face quietly staring at him as if it was his turn to ask, he felt the dream memories he had barely suppressed beginning to surge up. Yuder tried his best not to recall them and opened his mouth.

"...I was about to head down to the medical division."

"Why?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I thought I might talk to Enon if he was still awake....."

It sounded a bit awkward, but it wasn't entirely a lie.

"So, you were going to talk to him without even knowing if he was awake?"

"If he wasn't awake, I was just going to come back."

"Then isn't there a better choice than the uncertain one?"

Right in front of him. As he mumbled, his pale face left Yuder speechless. Struggling to find a response, Yuder licked his lips, and finally let out a sigh.

"Why are you here, really? Surely you didn't come to see me."

"Why do you say that with such certainty?"

"...So, you're saying you really came to see me?"

At this late hour, without even knocking on the door, simply standing in the corridor?

Facing Yuder's gaze, full of complex suspicion, Kishiar faintly smiled. His face appeared more languid and dreamy than usual, as if half-drowned in sleep.

"To be honest, I'm not sure myself. After hearing Nathan's report, it seemed I was just resting alone, and when I came to, I was here."

"Is that so..."

Could it be sleepwalking? Or perhaps a sign of health issues due to his cycle? Either way, moving unconsciously wasn't a good sign.

"Should I call Priest Lusan?"

"It's okay."

Kishiar, who responded lightly, removed himself from leaning against the wall and approached.

"Just, would you like to chat?"

Even if it's just a little. The end of the sentence was in such a small voice that it was uncertain whether it had been properly heard. As the distance lessened, he could distinctly feel an immense flow enveloping and moving Kishiar, unlike anything before. Being near Kishiar felt like floating in a very deep, black sea - a heavy, smooth sensation that pressed on the skin. It wasn't a painful sensation, but it made Yuder feel somewhat choked, so he unknowingly loosened the collar of his shirt a bit.

Immediately, Kishiar halted his steps and his gaze followed the movement.

"Are you uncomfortable?"

"...No."

Yuder alternated glances between his closed room door and Kishiar.

'Meeting Enon is out of the question.'

He had been worried about him not showing his face properly for several days, but he hadn't hoped to encounter him this way. Let alone in a situation where dreams of the past muddled his mind, what conversation was he to have with the person involved?

A proper assistant would have advised him to go rest considering his poor health.

'But...'

Nevertheless, Yuder felt a deep regret for his difficulty in telling Kishiar to leave immediately.

'Even though Nathan told me that the cycle and heat might overlap, I can't smell anything yet... Considering what could happen if he goes out in that state, it's better to invite him in for a while.'

Once again, after a deep sigh, Yuder reopened the door he had shut.

Was this a choice he wouldn't regret? He couldn't know.

"Would you like to come in for a while, perhaps have some tea?"

Kishiar, who had been standing in the corridor since his arrival, widened his eyes a little, perhaps not expecting an invitation. After a moment, he gently smiled and slid his foot into the open door.

"Sure."

Although the room wasn't large, being suitable for a single person, it didn't feel cramped. However, strangely, once Kishiar entered, it felt as though the room was suddenly full. Watching the man unfamiliarly looking around the new space, Yuder cleared the water glass on the table and lit the lamp.

"Please, take a seat."

After roughly sprinkling the tea leaves that Kanna had once forced onto the two tea cups, a small movement of his finger formed two droplets of water in the air. The droplets divided into two streams, filling each cup. With another flick of his hand, the tea heated to a suitable temperature, steaming in the cups. Looking down at the steamy tea cup, Yuder lightly pushed one toward Kishiar.

"Wait until the aroma comes out before you drink."

"You are remarkably efficient in brewing tea. Nathan would be disappointed if he saw this."

"If you have the skill, why not use it?"

Kishiar chuckled lightly at the firm reply.

"I've never had tea made with power before, so I'm looking forward to the taste."

The elegant man seated across reached out and picked up the cup. Despite its humble appearance, it transformed into something incredibly valuable and precious once held in his grasp. Why, indeed?

Yuder took the opportunity to speak as the man took in the aroma of the tea.

"Do you feel a bit better now?"

"If you're asking if I feel normal, then no."

The answer was as he expected, not particularly surprising.

"However, my mood is much better now that we're sitting across from each other."

"Do you really not remember how you ended up here?"

"That's correct."

"Do you have any suspicions?"

"Suspicious, you say..."

Kishiar, muttering under his breath, took a sip of his tea and fell silent, seemingly lost in thought as he gazed at the flickering lamp light.

"Ah, yes, I remember now."

Just when it seemed that he had remembered something, Kishiar set down his cup and spoke in a soft tone.

"You came to my room earlier today, didn't you?"

Yuder, trying to hide his surprise, almost dropped his own cup. He quickly regained his composure to prevent the trembling cup from spilling over, but it was already too late. Kishiar was watching, a small smile on his narrowed eyes.

"...Did you know?"

"I could feel it from inside."

Yuder recalled Nathan saying how Kishiar could sense the movements of others even when seated quietly. He felt a slight pang of defeat.

'Knowing who the opponent is, why did the impulse surge then...'

"Why did you come and then just leave?"

"It was nothing."

"I might have believed that if someone else said it."

Kishiar replied softly, his chin propped in his hand and his head slightly tilted. The small movement made the distance between them feel much closer due to the small table separating them.

"I can't believe it because it's Yuder Aile."

"Even if you can't believe it, it was truly nothing. What should I say in response?"

"Fine, let's change the subject. I don't want to believe it."

Despite the firm denial, Kishiar quickly changed the subject, letting out a laugh at Yuder's sour expression.

"To be honest, I was waiting for you to come in. I was really looking forward to the sound of knocking on the door. I swear."

"..."

Was the feeling of the pressure on his skin intensifying due to the aura Kishiar was emanating, or was it just his imagination? It could have been both.

"But then you turned around and left, and Nathan came and told me to correspond through letters for a while, wasn't that it?"

"That was..."

"I understand it's because of the heat period."

Kishiar cut in, exhaling a sigh.

"But sometimes, that's what makes it more bitter."

"So, is that why you came here?"

"Um... That wasn't really the intention. But the last thing I remember was thinking about it before closing my eyes."

His fingers, which had been circling the rim of his cup, came to a stop. His red gaze fell onto the lightly rippling surface of the tea.

"I thought perhaps if you tell me you were worried about me and that's why you wanted to come in, maybe this cold could also be dispelled."

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The whisper was as cold and barren as the darkness trying to swallow the dim light of the lantern. Yuder read unfamiliar emotions within that voice, feelings he hadn't expected Kishiar to reveal. The inside of his throat felt numbing and he felt queasy, like riding a rough wave.

What could this possibly be?

This was different from the intense impulse of the moment their lips met, and from the burning attraction that had spread like a wildfire.

There was no coercion, no commands, but strangely enough, the gate of his heart was easily swayed. He wanted to honestly admit his urge to check if Kishiar was in the room. However, he also worried about what might happen afterward.

Was this what it felt like to be thrown at a crossroads where nothing ahead could be seen? Lately, when standing in front of Kishiar, he often found himself caught up in such restlessness. Had he ever felt this much hesitation about what he intended to do? Yuder looked down, feeling like an explorer standing at the last moment before a point of no return. Kishiar's hand, still on the glass, caught his eye.

Unlike his dreams, that large hand, not wrapped in a glove, was the strongest proof that the past and the present were different.

The clearest of the leftover pen marks in the middle of the finger must be because he was working almost until he arrived here. An image of Kishiar working in the bedroom flitted across Yuder's mind.

Seeing him lying in bed when he wasn't well before, it wasn't hard to imagine him lying down working. Had he been like that all day today as well? Listening for any noise outside the door, quietly, and alone.

'It all leads to the same conclusion, no matter what I think.'

Just when he was about to avert his gaze in disbelief, he suddenly noticed something red inside Kishiar's sleeve. It was a fleeting glimpse that could be dismissed as a misperception, but Yuder's eyes, well-versed in wounds and death, instinctively discerned its nature.

'...A scar?'

All the complex thoughts that had occupied his mind until a moment ago vanished, leaving him blinking in surprise. Before he knew it, he had acted on impulse. Next thing he realized, he was lifting Kishiar's sleeve, holding the cuff in his hand.

"Commander, what is this..."

Sure enough, it wasn't a misconception. The thin, red mark revealed inside the sleeve was undoubtedly the trace of a healed wound. Even with divine power healing, deep wounds tend to leave a reddish mark for some time, and Kishiar's mark precisely matched that. It was a mark he had seen so many times in his past life that he knew it even if he didn't want to. His hand on the scar felt numb, possibly due to the intense shock and anger.

"What is this? Who did this?"

"There's no need to worry."

Casually, Kishiar pulled his arm away from Yuder's grasp. The scar vanished back under the sleeve.

"So, are you not going to answer me in the end?"

"Is the answer important right now?"

"It is important, of course."

His casual response was stupefying, but Yuder chose his words as calmly as possible.

"First, tell me who did this. Where and what did you do to leave such a deep wound? Who healed..."

Kishiar sighed.

"Who else."

"Excuse me?"

"I inflicted it myself. And I healed it myself. So, calm down."

Kishiar had personally inflicted and healed the wound? Was that true?

But why?

Yuder was speechless for a long time before he finally managed to move his lips.

"Why..."

"Because it's the most effective way to temporarily drain a large amount of energy from a human body. But of course, it does seem a bit extreme."

The response was so cold, it didn't feel like he was talking about his own body. It took several blinks for Yuder to understand that what he had just heard was related to the energy release cycle. Suddenly, a feeling of being choked hit him.

"You said you were drawing it out naturally. Is this your idea of natural?"

"..."

"Isn't it?"

Kishiar did not reply. Of course, it wasn't. Self-harm couldn't possibly be a natural method. So, had he always used this method to cycle his energy? Did Nathan Zuckerman know about this? Had he done the same in his past life?

'No, that can't be.'

No matter how Kishiar had transferred his energy before, Yuder instinctively knew this was not it. He might not know all about Nathan Zuckerman's nature, but he was sure Nathan wouldn't nonchalantly accept a method that hurt his lord. But then, why had Kishiar abruptly abandoned his original method and chosen to rip his arm?

Was there a reason that compelled him to?

His head started spinning. Looking at the speechless Yuder, Kishiar lifted the corners of his mouth in a troubled expression.

"It seems like you're quite shocked."

This was no time for a simple expression of surprise. It was enough to completely awaken him from what little sleep he had left.

"Does Zuckerman know?"

"Nathan doesn't. He'd be surprised, so let's keep it a secret."

"Have you been doing this since the start of this cycle?"

"No. Didn't I say this was a temporary method?"

Despite his denial, Yuder found it hard to believe him. He decided to consult with Nathan Zuckerman as soon as dawn broke.

The pale, bloodless face he had seen in the corridor wasn't just because of the night. His comment about the chill subsiding wasn't a mere metaphor either. Naturally, when blood leaves the body, one feels colder.

Mixed feelings of astonishment and directionless, intense emotions came over him.

'Didn't he say he values his body more than I do mine?'

Why would someone who is different from ordinary people in every way do such a thing?

Staring once again at Kishiar, Yuder suddenly felt as if he had found an answer in those watchful eyes. It was an implausible answer from a logical perspective, but for some reason, in this emotionally charged moment, it made sense.

'Could it be.'

"...Is it because of me?"

"..."

Again, there was no response. But unlike his smiling lips, his eyebrows softened slightly.

His absurd speculation shattered all at once. He saw his own face, mouth agape and speechless, faintly reflected in Kishiar's eyes.

'Did he tear his arm to come to me? Really?'

Something within him felt like it was being pushed off a cliff and tumbling down. Whatever had started rolling inside him, he knew he couldn't stop it with his own power.

"I'm sorry. When I said I couldn't remember anything on my way here, that was a lie."

Kishiar muttered, unsure what Yuder made of his silence.

"But I really wanted to see you. The thought that if not now, I couldn't ask, was too intense to bear. But my condition was too unstable to go outside..."

Behind the whisper that he had no choice but to rip his arm, it seemed as if countless words were echoing.

Why he had come to my bedroom door today.

If he had been thinking of me.

If he knew I was waiting.

"..."

"Are you disappointed? That I lack the restraint you have."

The lamplight flickered over a peculiar smile. The swaying light, due to an indiscernible sigh, made Kishiar's smile seem like a warped portrait. Something that had been tumbling inside Yuder reached a point of no return upon seeing that smile.

Remembering a dream of a day in a past life when Kishiar had said similar words, Yuder closed his eyes.

"I'm not particularly strong in restraint, either."

"People would be angry if they heard that."

"If I had such strong restraint, I would not have impulsively made my way to you, knowing where you were and what you were doing."

The gaze that fell upon his face was scorching. It was a straining feeling, but Yuder struggled to finish his final words.

"I was really impulsive. But then, I wanted to confirm something so badly that I couldn't resist."

Just like when he had torn his arm and stood in front of Yuder's room, unable to do anything.

In saying that he had come because he felt it had to be done then, he was no different from Yuder. Thinking this, a faint smile slipped out. He had considered them different in every way, but looking at it this way, they might have been quite similar.

'It makes sense that our behavior would be similar, considering I learned everything from Kishiar to become a Commander...'

"What was it?"

Kishiar asked what he had wanted to confirm.

Exhaling a sigh, Yuder looked straight at him.

"I wanted to confirm if you were really there."

That was it. Nothing more, nothing less. It was the simple truth.

After uttering it, the statement seemed too concise, feeling almost meaningless, and that left a sense of emptiness. However, it appeared the listener did not feel the same.

Gradually, the shadow lifted from the face of the silent Kishiar, and a smile brighter than the light blossomed.

"We were the same."

He whispered.

"Both of us were the same, weren't we?"

"Yes..."

Whether he heard the small response properly or not, the brighter smile illuminated the room.

Chapter 225

Yuder momentarily forgot everything at the sight of that smiling face. The fact that this was his untidy quarters, and the realization that the coming dawn would bring a day busier than most, all disappeared from his mind.

He stood dazed, merely staring ahead when Kishiar reached out slowly, their gazes locked. He guessed he wanted to touch his cheek, but he halted at a certain distance, trembling slightly, unable to move any closer.

Her hesitant fingertips twitched a few times, only to stop again.

"...Commander?"

When he asked him, implying why he was behaving in such a manner, Kishiar muttered slowly,

"I am so tempted to just let my hand reach you."

After closing his eyes briefly as if suppressing a powerful emotion, he continued,

"...But I can't. I'm too happy. I'm afraid I'll hurt you if I can't control my strength."

His expression mirrored the one he wore when he teased him in the Comander's office about how far he could touch him, only to avoid his response. Surely, he wouldn't need to restrain himself that much just to touch his cheek. Yuder, looking down at his own hand on his knee, cautiously spoke up.

"I'm not so fragile as to get hurt from that."

"I know that. But wouldn't you be repulsed if I accidentally released the energy of an Alpha Awakener?"

"Well..."

It was an answer he hadn't expected. Yuder blinked for a moment, then furrowed his brow.

It seemed Kishiar thought he feared or at least disliked Alpha Awakeners, considering the incident he had experienced during his second gender manifestation. That past incident was tied to his efforts to prevent a recurrence of old memories, but Yuder couldn't explain that, so he remained silent.

He wanted to say that then and now were different, but he didn't know exactly how to put it. He felt like a fool.

"I'm not... I don't dislike Alpha Awakeners. It was just... back then..."

When he fell silent, Kishiar let out a faint smile.

"You're quite affectionate, my assistant."

Affectionate. That was a compliment he never thought he'd hear in his lifetime. He wouldn't have been as surprised if he'd been ambushed. Yuder was bewildered, unsure whether to lower his head or not, when Kishiar suddenly started another topic.

"Do you know the easiest way to identify a broken imperial family member?"

"I don't."

"When they can't control their energy and it leaks out, it can hurt those around them. Something as small as a glass in their hand could shatter, or a living creature that touches them could suddenly die."

Kishiar murmured casually, looking down at his own fingertips.

"In my case, a horse's leg that I touched broke."

A chill ran down his spine.

"It was a creature I cherished, a gift for my birthday, but it couldn't withstand that incident and died."

"..."

"Nathan almost died several times being at my side. Not from battling like a knight, but simply because his master couldn't control his power."

Her tone was gentle yet self-mocking.

"I still think about those times, even now. Even knowing there's no need to worry, I find myself having such weak thoughts."

Perhaps it's because this is a period of erratic energy, his gaze turned toward Yuder's face as he mumbled. Suddenly, a smile graced his lips.

"Recently, whenever I saw my adorable assistant, such thoughts occurred to me. Perhaps I had grown too fond of him. If I were to hesitate further, it would only grow, never lessen."

Despite the blatant tease, he found himself at a loss for words, perhaps because of the nature of the content.

"But when this tiresome period passes, then..."

Though joy was visible in his eyes, the seemingly cold expression on his face returned. Watching him, Yuder reached out impulsively, ignoring Kishiar's mumbling. The moment his hand unexpectedly touched Kishiar's pale cheek, Kishiar stopped speaking, as if he had been struck by lightning.

"...Nothing's wrong, is it?"

Fortunately, a steady voice, albeit awkward, flowed out.

"I believe you're capable of handling this much. Even if you've become sensitive due to the cycle, over-worrying can be harmful, so please refrain."

Only then did Kishiar glance at the hand touching his left cheek. The sensation of strength entering his cold cheek felt oddly comforting.

'...If someone saw this, they'd arrest me on the spot for an outrageous blasphemy.'

The audacity of touching an imperial family member first. Had any commoner ever dared such an act in the history of the empire? Feeling the sweat pool in his palm, he contemplated whether he should withdraw his hand, just as Kishiar gave a barely perceptible smirk, closing his eyes.

Moments later, a cool warmth enveloped Yuder's hand. Kishiar, who had placed his hand atop Yuder's, tilting his head slightly, tightened his grip on Yuder's hand.

It was as though a giant beast was nuzzling its head into his hand. Before he could respond, a faint voice came to his ears.

"... You're right."

"..."

"Nothing really happens."

"Yes, nothing happens at this level."

Kishiar laughed. Simultaneously, warmth flooded his previously cold cheek. It was as if he could feel the sculpture of his life turn into a living person through his hand. Maybe this was that feeling.

"It's been so long..."

With each murmur akin to a sigh, he could feel the movement of Kishiar's lips beneath his palm.

"It's much warmer than I imagined."

As Kishiar slowly moved his head, his lips got closer to Yuder's hand. He thought about pulling away, but the firm grip on his hand didn't weaken. Finally, Kishiar, with his lips completely against Yuder's hand, closed his eyes and breathed out.

It was a thin breath, as if a bird had finally found a place to breathe.

"...Commander."

"Just a bit more."

As soon as he spoke, Kishiar's lips moved within the tight grip. When Yuder's fingers twitched at the ticklish sensation, he could feel everything, even the contours drawn by the moving lips.

"Sigh..."

Only after a considerable time, when his hand had started to numb, did Kishiar release his lips and reluctantly let go of his hand, sighing like a tired beast. The lips, visible even in the darkness, were noticeably flushed compared to before. The sight was unexpectedly provocative, making Yuder instinctively avert his gaze. A faint laughter echoed in his ears.

"It's time to get up."

Yuder, who was about to ask if he was leaving already, was startled to see that the darkness outside the window had significantly lightened. They hadn't exchanged many words, yet he was taken aback by how much time had passed.

"If we linger much longer... Nathan will realize my absence."

"As soon as you go back, get some rest, even if it's brief."

"I have something to say."

His face, murmuring apologies for stealing sleep time, relaxed even more than before. It seemed that the tension he had been suppressing since their hands touched had finally eased.

"I'll open the door for you."

"It's fine. You don't need to follow me out..."

As he was speaking, Kishiar, who was first to rise, suddenly swayed and steadied himself on the table. The sound of tea cups clashing echoed through the room.

"Commander?"

Worried something was wrong with him, he jumped up in surprise, only to see Kishiar, head lowered and holding his brow.

"...It's nothing. Just a sudden wave of sleepiness."

"Sleepiness, you say. Haven't you slept?"

"Well... I haven't really slept much lately."

He was about to ask if he had been having trouble sleeping when Kishiar, trying to take a step, wavered again. he sprang up quickly to support him.

"Don't... even though I said it's fine..."

He forced down his hand that was trying to push him away and put his arm around his shoulder. Given his much taller height compared to his, even this was a little challenging.

"We're okay now. I'll move you to the Commander's room. Please hang on a bit longer."

But before they could even take a few steps, Kishiar's knees gave out entirely. He couldn't hold up his weight and they both fell down.

'...Ugh.'

Fortunately, his instinctive use of wind magic cushioned their fall and prevented any injury. He swiftly got up and checked on Kishiar first.

His closed eyes, the still warm cheeks, his firm body... nothing seemed out of the ordinary as he checked him over. His regular, rhythmic breathing suggested he was simply asleep, not ill.

'...Even if he hadn't slept well lately, to suddenly fall asleep like this.'

He had been acting fine, but clearly, something wasn't right. He sighed heavily as he looked down at him. He could use his wind magic to move him, but the problem was that dawn was approaching. How could he be certain no one was already up and preparing to go out for their dawn training? If anyone saw him moving the collapsed Commander from his room, he didn't know what would happen.

'I should move him to my bed for now and report this to Nathan in the morning.'

He waved his hand, summoning a gust of wind, and gently lifted Kishiar's body onto his bed. After taking off his indoor shoes and covering him with a blanket, he found the sight of him laying there somewhat disconcerting.

'Kishiar La Orr is sleeping in my bed...'

It was an absurdly novel and unfamiliar sight. Not once in his previous life, nor in this one, had he ever seen him in such a vulnerable state.

'Now that's settled, but his legs are so long they hang off the bed... What should I do?'

He hadn't expected to worry about bending his long legs which hung off the bed. Feeling awkward with this unfamiliar problem, he tentatively put his hand on his leg, and suddenly felt as guilty as a criminal.

Chapter 226

‘Just leave it.’

Having finally withdrawn from the task more arduous than cupping a cheek - attending to the stiff legs, Yuder slumped into the chair where Kishiar had been seated, massaging his weary shoulders. From his position, he had a clear view of the face of the man lying on the bed.

The sleeping Kishiar looked surprisingly peaceful, much more than Yuder had expected. His breath was so faint, it was barely audible. Looking down at Kishiar, who lay motionless without a single toss or turn, Yuder felt his feelings start to settle.

‘... Isn't he sleeping too much like a corpse?’

Corpse. At the unbidden thought of the word, a long-buried memory suddenly surfaced. The funeral scene of Duke Peletta that took place before the first winter had passed after he became the Cavalry Commander. Even though it was the funeral of the last imperial bloodline, it was quite desolate in front of the casket.

Did the face in the coffin look like this when he silently laid a flower and turned away amid the hostile gazes and murmurings that were pecking and poking him all over?

"..."

Yuder clenched his fists, which were placed on his knees, and drove away his idle thoughts.

‘Am I daydreaming about my past life too much?’

Each time he was faced with Kishiar, and was tempted to kneel to his burning urge, memories and emotions of the past would suddenly spring forth as a backlash. Time had been turned back, but the memories remained unchanged. It was only natural, but the weight of the secret that hadn't been too uncomfortable at first felt increasingly heavy day by day.

Each time Kishiar revealed a bit more of his inner thoughts, Yuder was made painfully aware of the weight of his own hidden memories. Who would have thought that he, who had wanted to know Kishiar's secrets in his previous life, would now be in the opposite situation.

But the difference was clear, even though they found themselves in similar situations. The Yuder of that time had cried out for Kishiar to reveal the truth, but the present Kishiar was silently showing his innermost feelings without asking anything of Yuder, drawing him in.

While he was fine now, he wondered where this growing urge would lead him. Most of the changes from his previous life had been welcomed, but his relationship with Kishiar always felt different.

As he unclenched his hand, the nail marks were clear. Yuder looked down at them, then brought his hand up to his lips, pressing it against the inside of his palm. Unlike when Kishiar's lips had touched, this time it felt no warmth.

Releasing a sigh of disappointment at the foolish action, he noticed the rising sun beyond the window. Avoiding the sunlight, which he would usually have been happy to bask in, he rose to draw the curtains, Yuder thought of one thing.

‘I have already crossed the crossroads.’

Regardless of what he thought, he was now too far along to turn back.

The memory of kissing him still surfaced from time to time, as would the heat of his palm that had touched his lips today, and the sensation of embracing a collapsing body with no strength. He would never forget them.

So, in the end, there was only one thing left.

‘The situation has changed a lot from the initial expectation, but I still have to protect Kishiar. Just think about that.’

Yuder was about to sit back down in the chair, but he paused, looking down at Kishiar.

The energy that Kishiar had been wrapping around his body while he was awake seemed to have also fallen asleep, and the surroundings were much quieter than when he was forcibly suppressing it. Still, if he concentrated, he could feel a heavy energy slowly radiating into the air.

‘The vessel...’

Within Kishiar, four distinct powers coexisted - Sword Aura, Magic Power, Divine Power, and the Awakener's Power. His existence could almost be considered a blessing in itself, yet it was a

heartbreaking irony that he suffered for so many years, precisely due to the overwhelming nature of his powers.

'If only I could visually perceive this vessel, or feel it more tangibly...'

Mages were said to have ways of knowing how much magic power they had accumulated. Swordsmen, too, at the Swordmaster level, could roughly gauge how much aura they had built up over time. Priests, in particular, were quite adept at quantifying the amount of divine power they possessed.

Out of the four powers, determining the amount of power held by an Awakener was the most challenging. Still, those like Yuder, who had used these powers for a long time and had become sensitive to their flow, could gauge it to some extent. This was in the same vein as being able to visually perceive the flow of power when focused.

The power of an Awakener typically gathered below the navel, where the upper and lower body divided. Some individuals accumulated it elsewhere, but from what Yuder had observed in his past life, this was the general pattern.

'...There may be much I can't do in regards to other powers, but at least the power of an Awakener...'

Maybe it wouldn't hurt to confirm how much of it was present. Considering his state of heightened sensitivity, he might be able to sense the power enveloping him without too much struggle.

With his hand extended, he hesitated momentarily before it landed on the blanket. He then gently lifted the thin veil to gaze at the area around his belly underneath the revealed skin.

He thought that lifting his clothes would make it clearer, but he wanted to avoid any misunderstanding if he woke up.

'After all, I'm trying to discern it through the flow, so there's no need for that.'

With that thought, he placed his hand on his belly, concentrated his vision, and gave it his all.

Suddenly, he felt a tremendous pressure from beneath his hand.

'Huh?'

Without a chance to brace himself, a robust energy from within Kishiar, as if repelling an intruder, burst out with a 'whoosh' and shoved Yuder's hand away. At the same time, a red light emanated from the heated back of his hand.

Light, bursting along the faded purple spots that had been recently thinning, fiercely contested with the energy flowing out of Kishiar.

'...What is this?'

Even when he swiftly withdrew his hand, the light didn't stop flowing. Yuder was caught in a peculiar sensation, somewhat similar to the incident with the Red Stone in the basement, where he felt as though he could touch and manipulate the energies present in this space.

"...Ugh...!"

Groaning as the energy was rapidly drained, he stretched his hand towards Kishiar's body again with great difficulty. The energy radiated once more, causing his body to jolt. Thinking that Kishiar had awoken, he quickly turned his head, but Kishiar's eyes were still closed.

'This is...'

Slowly bending his fingers, Yuder tightly grasped a part of the energy surrounding Kishiar. Although he could not feel anything physically, the sense of 'holding onto something' registered in his mind.

He held onto the energy tightly to prevent it from escaping. After what felt like an eternity, the energetic trembling within his hand gradually calmed down. The energy surrounding Kishiar's body simultaneously weakened and then, abruptly, Yuder began to see unfamiliar landscapes that were starkly different from before.

Yuder saw the differing hues and textures of energies swirling above Kishiar's entire body. It was like watching a moving painting. Though he had never seen or learned about them before, he strangely felt an immediate clarity about their identities.

White divine energy wrapped around his head, the wind-like blue aura concentrated in both hands, golden magic power emanating from the heart like branching blood vessels, and the solid red power enveloping his body from the navel downward.

The latter red energy was, he was certain, the Awakened power that Kishiar possessed.

'I hoped to see it, but who would have thought I'd see it this way.'

The shock was so great it rendered his mind momentarily blank, but he could not afford to stop here. Yuder mustered the waning red energy and focused his mind. The four energies, coursing around his body, seemed to maintain a semblance of balance. However, they tangled and knotted where they met, preventing a smooth flow. The most significant entanglement was near his middle, close to the vital point.

Seeing the fist-sized lump pulsating as though it was a second heart, Yuder unwittingly held his breath.

'...What in the world is that?'

When he focused harder, it looked like the root from where all the energies started. They flowed out and returned to this knotted root, defining and merging their boundaries repeatedly.

Aside from the fact that energy flowed instead of blood, it indeed appeared to be a second heart.

The outermost layer of the lump was, once again, the red energy. Its strong presence maintained the form as though it wrapped and protected everything within.

'...Could that be the vessel?'

The sensation was incredibly intense and overwhelming, yet it also made him exceedingly anxious. Watching the flow of energies swirling around Kishiar's body, Yuder tentatively reached out to touch the nearest tangled bundle. He wanted to confirm if he could physically feel them.

The moment the red-tinged fingertips touched the entangled energy, the knotted portion twitched and recoiled with a sensation akin to sparking fire.

And Kishiar also seemed to feel pain at the same spot, his eyelids flickering and brows furrowing.

Grinding his teeth against the pain in his hand, Yuder bore it for a moment before releasing his breath.

'...It hurts similarly to when the spots were inflamed.'

Still, it was bearable for now. Looking down at his hand, enwrapped in the red glow, he couldn't determine if the spots had spread.

After taking a deep breath, he reached out once again, this time towards the navel where most of the red energy was concentrated. The Awakened energy, glowing the same hue as that enshrouding his hand, softly rippled as if welcoming him.

Chapter 227

The power of an Awakener, as radiant as the light that wrapped around Yuder's hand, gently rippled as if welcoming him.

'Maybe this side is a bit easier to handle.'

However, contrary to his thoughts, the power of an Awakener was not that easy to control. It didn't react or inflict pain when he tried to manipulate it like he did with other powers. Yet, the power merely twined around Yuder's hand as if trying to cling to it, only to return to its original place, repeating this cycle. It was uncanny how it seemed intent on touching of its own volition, yet always slipped away, as if mocking its own master.

'Do powers also take after their master?'

Regardless of the numerous attempts, the outcome was always a failure.

'The remaining three powers are too resistant, and the power of an Awakener is hard to grasp...'

He wondered if he should just give up for now. He didn't want to rashly tamper with it and risk causing more harm. But there was no guarantee that this fortuitous opportunity would present itself again. If this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, he knew he would undoubtedly regret not seizing it. Looking at the red aura that encased his hand, Yuder gritted his teeth.

'I must at least try to touch the power.'

Fortunately, Kishiar had not yet woken up. Even though he felt his energy draining faster than when he summoned the fiery pillar that seemed to pierce the sky, he could still endure. With his other hand, Yuder wiped the sweat accumulating on his forehead.

'Instead of blindly trying to touch it, I should carefully observe it first.'

He took a deep breath to calm his rushing thoughts and focused. With a splitting headache, he started to see the flow of the aura wrapping around Kishiar's body more clearly.

'The problem is definitely those tangled lumps, regardless of how you look at it...'

Ideally, each power should flow in its own place like blood circulating in the body. The current situation, where powers were tangled together, blocking their paths, couldn't possibly be good for the body. The flow of power was very slow now, possibly due to Kishiar's sleeping state. If the flow sped up, the collisions and tangles would undoubtedly worsen.

'The expression "a crack in the vessel" must refer to the situation where the power lump, which seems like a vital point, gets stressed and causes a problem.'

With this understanding, he could also see why Kishiar mentioned a 'cycle' as necessary. If the four powers inside his body failed to maintain a proper balance and one of them inflated too much, or all of them swelled and blocked the flow, the number of those tangled lumps would increase correspondingly.

If such problems escalated, it would inevitably lead to a breakdown. Therefore, it was necessary to extract some of the accumulated power before it expanded too much.

'...It's probably better to let it out before it gets too congested and bursts.'

Kishiar mentioned that the imperial family members who broke their vessels died as their bodies exploded. No matter how strong a being was, they could not defend against an attack from within.

'But in the end, it wasn't a fundamental solution.'

Considering the issue originated from having multiple powers, which most humans found challenging to possess even one, finding a solution was difficult. Frankly, even Yuder, who was observing these enormous powers clearly through his eyes, had no clue where to start.

Yuder felt a shiver down his spine thinking that if it weren't for the power of the Awakener one, which was solidly wrapped around the other three remaining energies from the outside like a fence, Kishiar might have already died from his body exploding. When he had heard the tale of the imperial family member dying from an exploded body, he'd only vaguely imagined it as a dreadful scene. Now, however, seeing the flow of energy firsthand, he could easily envision how such a calamity might occur.

Unconsciously, Yuder shook his chilling head, grinding his teeth.

'At least, Kishiar is safe from such a death now.'

But recalling once again that Kishiar had ripped open his own arm to extract blood and power before coming here, Yuder's emotions were somewhat complicated.

He wiped the sweat emerging from his temple once more and then tensed his hand. Of all the energies flowing within Kishiar, he moved his arm towards the smallest tangled part which was closest to where the power of the Awakener one was gathered.

Just like the last time when he thought that he must control the power of the Red Stone, which might collapse the basement, he focused all his strength to grasp this energy.

'Just like before... Just one more time!'

An intense pressure that felt like it could break his bones rushed in, making his fingers tremble uncontrollably. Although his lungs felt like they would burst due to his heavy breathing and he was in agony, Yuder, in his intensely concentrated state, didn't feel a thing.

'I can grab it.'

The power of the Awakener that was wrapped around the tangled energies. He had to seize it.

Heat rose above his wide-open eyes. His body was shaking violently. An energy akin to smoke seemed to bloom, dyeing the inside of Yuder's eyes a red hue, but he himself was unaware of it.

And finally, when he felt something catch onto his fingertips with a thunk.

Yuder seized it without missing a beat. A red energy glowed intensely within his trembling hand.

'I've got it!'

He'd grasped the 'power' of the Awakener flowing within Kishiar.

Yuder gripped something invisible trying to escape from his hand, inhaling sharply. The energy of Kishiar in his hand flickered, transmitting a strange sensation he'd never felt before. It felt like forcibly holding onto something too massive to be held in his grasp. His fingers were throbbing as if they might explode and it was hot, but he didn't loosen his clenched fist. It was the same as when he had grasped the power of the Red Stone in the basement. At this moment, he was connected to the power through his hand.

'As for Kishiar...'

After he seized the energy, he instinctively turned his gaze to the man who was still asleep, as if nothing had happened. It seemed that he did not feel any pain unlike when he touched the tangled part of the energy earlier and there was a backlash. Seeing him like this, Yuder felt a little relieved.

'What should I do now?'

He pondered absentmindedly, and as if to provide an answer, the power of the Awakener writhed.

'...Right. The tangled lump is surrounded by the power of the Awakener, so by creating a pathway from the outside for the tangled energy to move again... If I move...'

Yuder exhaled and moved his hand very slowly. As his hand enveloped in red energy moved slightly, the energy of the Awakener, which was surrounding the small lump of tangled power, expanded or contracted in response to his will.

"Is this the right thing to do?" The doubt that had meekly raised its head gradually became overwhelmed by certainty as he observed the dwindling energy, seemingly swallowed by a rising wave of uncertainty. A gale seemed to roar in his ears and sweat poured out like rain. All his energy seemed to be sucked away, focused solely on moving his hand.

How many times had he moved it like that?

The tangled energies had completely untangled, vanishing with a rustle. All that remained was a clean flow of energy, finding its original place with no obstructions. Yuder finally let out the breath he'd been holding, quietly observing this spectacle.

"Ah..."

He had actually done it.

The sight was astonishing, almost unbelievable.

He had only managed to remove one entangled root of power within Kishiar's body, but it felt like he had accomplished the greatest feat of his life. His heart pounded like it had when he had managed to run over an entire mountain. He couldn't be sure, but Kishiar, who had his eyes closed, seemed to be breathing more slowly and steadily than before.

'...I think it's impossible to do anything more.'

Along with his instinctive judgement, Yuder slowly let his hand fall. The red energy that had wrapped around his hand gradually faded and all the sights that he had seen through his eyes blurred. Intense fatigue and hunger struck him.

After a while, when he opened his eyes again, he only saw the normal room with no strange power visible.

"..."

He was seated in a position where he could watch Kishiar, who was asleep with his eyes tightly closed.

But the morning sun pouring in through the closed curtain, the deep purple spots on his hands, and his palms feeling hot as if they were burned were all shining like evidence that something had happened here for a considerable amount of time.

Yuder slowly rolled up his sleeve. The skin that turned purple stretched endlessly. Lowering his sleeve and pulling a bit on the clothes near his shoulder to look inside, the spots had spread below his chest.

'...'

His head felt dizzy for a moment, but oddly enough, there was no pain.

'I wonder if it would be different if I use my power...'

Yuder cautiously tried to use a bit of water power with one finger raised. His initial plan was to conjure a small stream of water.

But a moment later, enough water to fill a kettle spilled over in the air, drenching his knees and face.

While blankly blinking at his wet knees, Yuder tried to summon wind. He had only planned to conjure enough power to dry the water, but in an instant, a hot wind strong enough to take his breath away blew, not only drying his clothes but making them stiff.

'What on earth...'

There was no doubt about the control of his power. But the results were amplified by several times. It was only natural that the experiment shown by Thais Yulman and his apprentice Alik flashed through his mind. He fumbled in his pocket wondering if there was a catalyst in his clothes, but there was nothing in the casual clothes he wore to bed.

Yuder, who was about to get up from his spot relieved that Kishiar hadn't woken up yet, suddenly found something and paused again.

'Has the spot faded?'

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'Have the spots faded?'

He thought it might be an illusion, but it wasn't. His hand, which had been so deeply dyed it almost appeared black, had noticeably lightened to a faint purple hue.

Yuder flipped his hand back and forth, examining it, then once again pulled down the collar of his shirt to peer inside.

'The area hasn't shrunk.'

The spots that had spread from his shoulder to his chest hadn't significantly reduced in size. However, it too had faded considerably. Yuder stared at it for a moment before letting out a deep sigh.

'Let's think this through.'

What had changed between the time he received divine healing and now?

'Back then, every time I used the Awakener's power, the stain spread and the pain increased. Healing was painful too. After the second gender manifestation and the basement incident, things improved... but now...'

He hadn't used the Awakener's power in the usual way, but rather, during the process of examining Kishiar, a red energy suddenly burst from his hand and wrapped around his arm, causing the stain to spread. Despite the discoloration area increasing significantly, the pain was less than expected, and when he used his inherent Awakener power, the color faded. Unlike when he received divine healing, there was no pain, and the most distinct change was not a reduction in area, but a lightening of color.

'The lack of pain is understandable, considering my body has been like that since it manifested the second gender. But how should I interpret this red power that flowed from my hand?'

Yuder speculated that the cause of this strange situation was the red power that had flowed from his hand. The Awakener's power he usually used didn't have that color. Like other Awakeners, it was barely visible, like a faint shimmering haze, only when he concentrated intensely.

'Except for when it glowed while connected to the power of the Red Stone in the basement, and today...'

Various events he had seen and heard about passed through his cluttered mind.

The similarity of the red power that flowed from his hand when connected to the Red Stone.

The gradual changes in his body related to the spots.

The hypotheses and speculations of Thais Yulman. The metaphor of poison that Enon had mentioned.

The amplified power after removing the tangled mass of energy inside Kishiar.

And the medium.

Yuder stopped the repetitive motion of clenching and unclenching his fist.

'The medium.'

Enon had previously speculated that if his body had successfully absorbed some of the power of the Red Stone that had infiltrated his body, he might have become a living medium, indistinguishable from the Red Stone itself. In that case, the original power he possessed might have been enhanced by the addition of the raw power of the Red Stone.

'After hearing that, I thought that the power of the Red Stone, which had infiltrated and merged like the stain, might have transformed to enhance the Awakener's power I originally possessed... But could it be that it's not transformed, but able to move in its original form?'

He didn't know why it was flowing out, but once it did, it could be controlled to some extent by his will.

'If the reason for the increase in my spots is the absorption of power different from my own, then the increase this time... maybe it's because when I untangled Kishiar's tangled powers, I absorbed some of it in the process. I recall hearing that mediums have a nature of drawing in power...'

Even though he had done it, the sensations from that time felt hazy, like something that happened in a dream. However, the sensation of firmly grabbing and moving an invisible force, and the burning tension of the moment when the two forces were tightly connected, were still relatively clear.

Yuder looked down at his hand, recalling Kishiar's power mass that had gradually welled up and then decreased within it. At the time, he hadn't given it much thought, but now, looking back, didn't it seem similar to something being sucked in?

He couldn't be sure if that was the right answer. Perhaps all his guesses could be wrong, but it seemed to be the best fit for the current situation. Yuder frowned, feeling a sudden strangeness in his own body, which had previously moved so familiarly.

'It's creepy... but there's a possibility. If I've really become similar to a living medium...'

Thais Yulman had said that a medium containing the power of the Red Stone, despite not emitting any magic, absorbs the power of the Awakener, amplifies it, and then outputs it. The power that Yuder had just used was also displayed in a much amplified form than the amount used.

'After using it, the power of the Red Stone in the medium was said to decrease slightly, and my spots also faded.'

Could this be interpreted as a sign that his guess was right?

Feeling an inexplicable dryness in his throat, Yuder swallowed and sighed deeply.

'I was already considered non-human because of being too strong, I wonder what will happen if this fact becomes known.'

Becoming stronger was good. However, Yuder preferred getting stronger through training rather than gaining an unknown power in this way. More than anything, the hazy feeling when the red energy wrapped around or connected with his body was not to his liking.

The strange sensation of knowing the essence of things he didn't know or understanding how to move next just by looking.

'But, thanks to the red power popping out at the right moment, I was able to see the state of Kishiar's body. Should I be thankful, then?'

He was a little worried about how the mass of energy, which he wasn't sure whether he had properly removed or absorbed, would affect Kishiar when he woke up later. But seeing his much more relaxed breathing and expression, his instinct seemed to tell him that it wouldn't lead to a bad outcome.

"Huff..."

Once he had somewhat organized his thoughts, his eyes felt gritty as if he hadn't slept for days, and fatigue rushed over him. Yuder sat down on the chair and looked at Kishiar's face.

He had a truly handsome face. The golden eyelashes that sparkled in the faint light coming through the curtain, and the alluring lips that caught the eye with their returned vitality were all delicate and beautiful.

However, Yuder thought that it was far better to see things with his eyes open than with them shut.

'I can't believe I'm having these thoughts in this situation.'

He let out a sigh of hollow amusement, finding it ridiculous that he was even capable of such thoughts in his terribly exhausted and chaotic state.

'First, I cannot walk around looking like this, so let's put in some more effort to eliminate the spots as much as possible. I don't know how much they will disappear, so I should check that too... And what else am I checking?'

In all honesty, he wanted to simply sit and close his eyes for a moment. However, Yuder shook off such desire, gathering his strength. After doing several calculations considering the amplifying situation, he moved his hand slightly, and a flame of appropriate size flared up over the dying lamp.

Even after accomplishing what would have made his struggling comrades fall to their knees in despair, not a trace of pride showed on Yuder's face. While maintaining the flame, he alternated his tired gaze between the gradually fading spots and Kishiar's face, mentally calculating the time.

His head was beginning to grow fuzzy.

...

Suddenly, someone touched his body, which had fallen into a sleep so deep it was as if he were dead, without even dreaming.

'...Oh dear.'

A low muttering filled with complicated emotions echoed in his ear, and shortly after, another hand cautiously crept under his legs, lightly lifting him into their arms.

The scent that flooded his nostrils from the chest his face was pressed against was very familiar. It was strange as it was definitely a scent that shouldn't exist in this world. As he furrowed his brows at its strangeness, he thought he could hear a chuckle from above his head.

'Why is it that my body feels so light? I wonder if it's a fairy.'

The arm that gently lowered Yuder onto a soft place didn't leave immediately, instead lingering around for quite a while. Each time the hand gently brushed his tousled hair away from his forehead, the cool warmth strangely lifted his spirits.

This pleasant and drowsy sensation couldn't possibly be real. After all, such a reality couldn't exist for him. With a simple conclusion, his consciousness once again sank deep beneath the surface.

It couldn't have been anything but a strange dream.....

Yuder suddenly woke from his sleep, opening his eyes. He was in the middle of keeping watch over the lamp flame, intending to confirm the fading spots till the end, but he couldn't remember when he had fallen asleep.

Baffled, he raised his hand to see his skin had completely transformed. It appeared he had fallen asleep only after all the spots had faded. As he let out a sigh of relief and turned his gaze, he noticed the room was empty. Kishiar was gone, and Yuder himself was unexpectedly lying down on the bed.

'When did I lie down?'

He blankly turned his head towards the window which was shrouded in darkness due to the firmly closed curtain. Faint noises came from beyond, indicating that he hadn't been asleep for too long.

Yuder managed to lift his languid body. Something fell from on top of him even before the blanket did. He looked down to find it was the edge of someone's overcoat.

An overcoat much larger than any ordinary person's and far too luxurious to be worn by anyone less than nobility. He didn't need to see it to immediately know to whom it belonged.

'...Why is this here?'

Chapter 229

'...Why?'

Why had it been left behind? Puzzled, he picked up the clothing, and the long, trailing hem was suddenly tugged tight. Only then did Yuder realize that a portion of the garment had been trapped beneath him, causing a moment of embarrassment.

'Surely, it wasn't removed because of this... Does this mean I should return it today, after I leave first?'

No matter how much he thought about it, the latter seemed more plausible. After completely freeing the trapped hem of the garment, Yuder folded it roughly and set it aside, then rose from his spot. He felt less fatigued, perhaps due to the sleep he had, but his eyes were still quite heavy.

'It's a relief that I don't necessarily have to participate in today's training...'

Normally, he wouldn't have been this tired just from staying up for a day. The likely cause of his poor condition was closely related to the incident that had occurred in the early morning, but since it was all a result of his own choices, there was no one to blame.

He sighed and prepared to go outside. First, he wanted to check if there was anything wrong with Kishiar's body, so he folded the outer garment that he had left behind, draped it over his arm, and left the room.

However, before he could reach the Commander's office, someone called out to Yuder in the hallway.

"Yuder!"

Turning his head, he found himself face-to-face with Steiber Rendley, who was the Deputy Commander of the Sul Division. He was with a few other members. As soon as they exchanged brief eye contact, Steiber immediately opened his mouth to ask a question.

"You weren't seen all morning, did you go somewhere?"

His gaze was fixed on Kishiar's clothes hanging on Yuder's arm. He probably didn't recognize whose clothes they were, but he seemed to guess that Yuder had been somewhere related to them.

"No, I just woke up a bit late... I was just about to get moving."

"Oversleeping? That's unusual."

Steiber, who had widened his eyes, chuckled after a moment.

"You must have been tired from working too much these days. No matter how young you are, health is the most important. I'm over 40 now, and I can definitely feel that my body isn't what it used to be. You should be careful in advance. You look quite pale, do you want some special health juice made at our bakery?"

Yuder thanked the kind middle-aged man who was showing concern for his pale complexion, assuring him that he was fine.

"But... what were you three discussing here? Was there an incident?"

The atmosphere between him and the other members was strangely different from usual. It didn't seem like they were just chatting, and sure enough, when he asked, Steiber expressed admiration.

"How did you know? Actually, we were discussing an incident that happened at the training ground."

An incident at the training ground? Yuder's eyebrows twitched at the unusual feeling.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone in the Commander's office, and it's also difficult for us to handle it on our own, so when I saw you, the assistant, I called you... haha."

"There's no one in the Commander's office? Nathan Zuckerman should be there."

After Kishiar entered his cycle, the Deputy Commanders rarely came to the Commander's office, but if they deemed it necessary, they occasionally came up to convey their opinions to Nathan Zuckerman or Yuder. Of course, Nathan Zuckerman wasn't always in the Commander's office, but if that were the case, he would have called Yuder to take some action, so it was incomprehensible that he had left his post without any news.

"I thought so too. But the door was completely locked. And there was someone who saw the Commander's carriage leaving a few hours ago. So we thought the Commander had temporarily gone out with Zuckerman and you."

Steiber, stroking his chin, sighed in response.

"It's fortunate that you were here... Hmm."

"The carriage left...?"

In that case, as Steiber said, it was highly likely that Kishiar had temporarily left the Cavalry and accompanied Nathan Zuckerman.

'I wonder what happened. He should barely be able to move since his cycle hasn't ended yet. Is he okay?'

He couldn't think of where they might have gone. Yuder decided to abandon his plan to go to the Commander's office for now.

"I see. I didn't know the Commander had left."

"If he didn't tell you, he probably didn't go far. It's better to wait for him to return and tell us."

"But Steiber... can everyone wait until then? The atmosphere isn't very good right now..."

One of the members who had been with Steiber interjected with a furrowed face. It was Dover, who was relatively quiet among the members.

"If we go back and wait for the Commander to come, someone might really rush into the training ground to fight the Imperial Knights."

"That's the problem... Hoo. Everyone has been patient enough, so I don't know what to say..."

"I'm also worried about the condition of the item."

"What exactly happened?"

Yuder cut off their conversation and opened his mouth. He couldn't ignore the mention of the Imperial Knights.

'What happened? Is it related to them?'

"Hmm. Well..."

Eventually, Steiber began to speak with a troubled look in his eyes.

"To put it briefly, it's an emotional issue related to the use of the training ground. We were allowed to use the training ground only until the morning, and when one of us left, he realized he had left something behind and went to get it, but the knights wouldn't let him in."

"They wouldn't let him in?"

At Yuder's question, Dover, with his shoulders slumped, muttered, "And they were extremely insulting."

"Even though it would only take a moment, and it was an important item, so we promised to get it right away, they mocked us. There have been similar incidents before, but it never got this serious. Today, it almost exploded. We thought of calling the Commander through Steiber and a few of us came back first, but we don't know what to do in this situation. Phew."

Among the training grounds that the Cavalry could use, the rest, except for the open space behind the barracks and the small space inside the barracks building, were originally used by the Imperial Knights. Kishiar had chosen the training grounds close to the barracks and allowed the Cavalry to use them for a set time, which the knights found extremely unpleasant.

They often sent silent threats and pressure to the Cavalry members during the change of training ground usage rights, and some even started quarrels as if to make them hear from outside before the training ended.

"Ever since the festival where the Cavalry's name rose, it had been quiet, but I never thought this problem would erupt. I understood Steiber's words, 'we've endured as much as we could.'"

"So... where are the other members who were training there now?"

"They're still in front of the training ground."

"How many?"

"About... fifteen."

"And the Imperial Knights?"

"Over twenty."

Yuder looked at the faces of the members, each with a different expression. Even the cautious Steiber, who suggested waiting for now, couldn't hide his discomfort, indicating that he had been quite troubled by this issue. And yet they had endured until today. The long-standing feelings towards the Imperial Knights stirred anew.

"Yuder. Would you come with us if you're okay?"

Dover, sighing deeply once again, asked Yuder for help.

"Whether we wait for the Commander or not, it seems difficult to calm those guys down with just us. The Imperial Knights might have provoked more in the meantime..."

The incident where Yuder single-handedly took down several Imperial Knights knights who were picking fights was already famous within the Cavalry. Seeing the hopeful looks in their eyes, Yuder felt strangely unfamiliar, but he nodded firmly.

"Okay."

"Thank you, Yuder. It's a matter that I, as the Deputy Commander, should be responsible for... It's embarrassing, but I can't be more relieved that you're coming with us."

Steiber lowered his voice and expressed his gratitude with a relieved face.

"No problem. I'm glad if I can help."

"Just being there is already a big help. We're sorry to call you out for this when you looked tired."

Yuder looked at Steiber's face thoughtfully. He was popular among the members and had excellent abilities, but he still lacked experience in playing the role of Deputy Commander in hostile

situations. It was impressive to see him smiling honestly, without any sign of hurt pride, in such a situation.

'Just like Ever, experience comes with time, so it doesn't matter.'

This opportunity might be a good chance to show him how to handle such situations to some extent. It was a good choice for them to come to Kishiar first, but they also needed to know that there was no need to be considerate of the Imperial Knights.

"Dover! You're here?"

"Where's the Commander?"

"Huh? It's not the Commander, Steiber and Yuder came together."

"Yuder?"

"Yuder?"

Following Dover's lead, they headed towards the training ground where the Cavalry members were said to be gathered. As they approached, the faces of those who could not hide their anger rushed toward them. Amidst them, Yuder spotted the familiar faces of the Eldore siblings and let out a low sigh. Indeed, if the Eldore siblings were involved, it was understandable why Dover was worried that the angry members might not be able to hold back any longer.

As he looked around, he saw knights inside the training ground, flaunting their swords as if to show off. They pretended not to care about this side, but anyone could see they were mocking. Most of them were strangers, but three were familiar. If he didn't know their names but recognized their faces, there was only one reason. They were the ones who had ignored Kishiar and passed by some time ago.

Upon recognizing their faces, Yuder's eyes gradually narrowed.

'Hmm...?'

After imprinting the faces of those who had ignored Kishiar in his mind, Yuder, who was looking around again, spotted another familiar knight.

'Kiolle da Diarca. Seeing him here again.'

He was the one among the knights who was yawning with the most nonchalant expression. He hadn't noticed Yuder yet, but after seeing him, Yuder thought that this matter might be resolved much better than he thought.

"Steiber! Listen! Those guys..."

"Did the Commander give permission? Then we can now enter the training ground, right?"

"Wait, just a moment. Let me speak first..."

In the midst of the excited Cavalry members, Yuder took a step forward to rescue Steiber, who was waving his hands as if surrounded by excited puppies.

"I'm sorry, but the Commander is not here right now."

"Huh?"

Upon hearing the soft yet strangely nerve-grabbing voice, the members all quieted down at once.

"He's not here? So we can't go in again?"

"Do we have to wait until we can go in tomorrow?"

The Eldore siblings asked in unison. Yuder, enduring the gaze of several pairs of eyes turned towards him, continued his words.

"No."

His lips, which had been tightly closed, drew a faint upward curve.

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"Of course... we must go in."

"... Yuder?"

Startled by Yuder's unexpected proposal, Steiber, who had thought that Yuder came to help calm the members, could not hide his surprise as he stuttered from a distance.

'What is he trying to do?'

Yuder looked back at the members after flashing a reassuring smile in Steiber's direction.

"Who said they left something inside?"

"It's me."

From behind the gathered crowd, a Cavalry member, who had been looking somber, raised her hand and stepped forward.

'Phieny Moffle. She can shoot arrows of wind that are invisible to the naked eye.'

Although she could only shoot about five arrows per day, the invisible attack was a valuable ability with high growth potential. Yuder glanced at the bow she was carrying on her back and nodded.

"Alright. Can you tell me exactly what you left inside?"

"It's a leather pouch with a bow pattern."

Phieny stared at her bare hands and replied in a gloomy tone.

"I thought I had taken it after training... I didn't realize I dropped it because I was in such a rush to leave."

"When did you realize it was missing?"

"I noticed it as soon as I left the training ground and started walking."

Upon realizing her pouch was missing, Phieny returned to the training ground but was blocked by the imperial knights who were already inside. Her companions who had followed her out of concern protested, but all they received were cold disdain and scoffs.

"I feel so sorry and ashamed in front of everyone else. I should have checked my pouch more thoroughly... It's all my fault."

"Don't say that, Phieny."

Another member standing next to Phieny raised his voice in fury.

"It's not a simple bow-patterned pouch. You're worried that the damned knights will trample on the bow-patterned pouch that your deceased mother made, what's wrong with that? We're not here because we want to be. You don't have anything to apologize for."

At his words, everyone nodded their heads in agreement. Yuder surreptitiously glanced at Steiber who by now looked displeased. He had heard about the lost item, but he didn't seem to know about its sentimental value.

"Steiber."

After saying his name with the meaning of 'you should go in after hearing all this,' Steiber met his gaze with a complicated look in his eyes.

"Phew... alright. If that's the case, we should go in and retrieve it. But, do you have any good ideas?"

"What kind of plan could there possibly be?"

Yuder quietly answered as he moved.

"Even though the training ground usage time is divided, that only applies to training activities. They can't prevent simple visits. We just need to go in and find it."

"Uh, um. Okay. I don't know whether I should say it's good because it's simple, or... it's quite clear."

Looking at Yuder with a peculiar gaze, Steiber looked up at the sky once, bowed his head towards the ground, and let out a long sigh again.

"I'm asking just in case, what if they attack us?"

"What do you mean, what if?"

Yuder, who was walking through the parted Cavalry members, stopped right in front of the entrance to the training ground and turned around.

"Steiber. Surely, you're not worried that we might lose to them?"

A word of provocation, accompanied by a smirk, had quietened the crowd.

A moment later, Steiber broke the silence with a hollow laugh.

"There's no way that could be."

"Yes, I think so too."

‘No problem then.’ Yuder left his words unspoken, but everyone understood his intention. The members, finally permitted to enter, began to chatter in deep excitement.

"Good. Of course, it has to be like this!"

"We can go in now, right? We will show them what we are made of!"

"Wait, just a moment."

Phieny, who still wore a sorry expression, raised her voice lastly, standing beside the members who were preparing to enter with clenched fists and high spirits.

"But the Commander is not here, what if he finds out about this later....."

Yuder glanced back at her and responded briefly.

"It's okay. That's the least of our worries."

"What?"

He was willing to bet that Kishiar, who learned of this event belatedly, would regret not having been part of such an intriguing incident.

"Alright, let's go in. Whoever finds the leather pouch that Phieny lost, immediately raise your hand and shout out loud. Don't delay the search."

Steiber loudly gave the final notice to the members. Once the decision was made, his attitude became carefree, as if a weight had been lifted off his chest.

"Find either me or Yuder immediately if you think it's dangerous. Well, there shouldn't be anyone like that here, though."

"Of course."

The members responded in unison.

They entered the training ground eagerly, ready to blow off all the frustration they had accumulated so far. The area was spacious enough for dozens of people to train scattered about, so it seemed that finding a small pouch would take some time.

"What are you doing!"

Then, a knight swinging his sword nearby came straight forward and started yelling.

"I kept telling you not to enter, yet you intrude? Leave immediately. If you do not retreat within three seconds, I will attack you for ignoring the warning."

"Let's scatter and start looking."

Steiber gestured dismissively, ignoring the knight's threats. The members scattered smoothly as if they had been waiting for this. The knight who had been brandishing his sword dramatically was taken aback, his eyes wide open in surprise.

"Can't... can't you hear me? I said, leave right now.....!"

"Why should we?"

Yuder opened his mouth in place of Steiber.

"We're not intending to stay here forever, we will leave as soon as we find the item we lost. I don't understand why you're threatening us for that."

"Threatening.....? How dare this insolent peasant slander me!"

Why did these guys always bring up "peasants" when they ran out of arguments? It's as tedious as it was in his previous life, Yuder thought, letting out a small sigh. The knight took his action as an even greater insult.

"You insolent boy. I will correct that bad habit of yours today."

The knight aimed his sword at Yuder, making Steiber, who was standing nearby, furrow his brows. Yuder responded with a slight nod to his inquiring look, signaling not to worry.

"My beloved sword Alrund has no mercy. Even if you lick the ground crying, bark like a dog, and beg, I will never forgive you! You will regret provoking me!"

'That's a peculiarly detailed description. Perhaps he's a pervert of that taste.'

Yuder distinctly remembered there being a rule in the Imperial Knight about never drawing one's sword without cause, yet for some reason, the knights he encountered had no problem whipping out their swords and bragging about it, regardless of what was said. It was questionable whether they even realized that their conduct lacked the knightly or aristocratic dignity they so boasted about.

'Well, no matter. All I need to do is kill off their deception today.'

‘Shall we start with this one?’ Yuder contemplated, as he eyed the knight's sword.

"What's going on here?"

However, at that moment, the other knights seemed to sense the impending crisis and peered from behind. Yuder noticed among them the ones who had previously ignored Kishiar, and felt relieved that he wouldn't have to go hunting for them.

"The impudent commoners who have been making a ruckus outside have dared to trespass into the training grounds. And among them, this one has shown particularly insolent behavior, so I thought it would be best to teach him a lesson before expelling him!"

The knight, who had behaved entirely differently when dealing with Yuder and the Cavalry, reported loudly.

"He did that?"

The knights collectively glared at Yuder. Instead of answering, Yuder straightened Kishiar's clothes, which he was still casually draping over his arm, an act that anyone could interpret as a clear sign of disregard.

"Huh! He must have nine lives. Is he of a significant rank?"

It was so like them to judge everything based on rank or social status. Yuder just tilted his head in response, swallowing a twisted smile.

"What's your name?"

"..."

"Ha, it seems you'll need to be half-dead before you regain your senses!"

'You lot are the ones more likely to be half-dead.'

However, Yuder was once again prevented from acting as another group of knights made their appearance.

"Everyone's here. I clearly asked you to find out why the Cavalry members suddenly came here and started wreaking havoc..."

The man approaching with an angry voice suddenly stopped his sentence. Kiolle da Diarca stared at Yuder with wavering eyes.

"..."

"..."

‘Why are you here?’

To the agonizing silence, Yuder could only respond with a significant smile. Kiolle, who faced the smile, momentarily tried to step back but stopped himself just in time.

"Sir Diarca, what's the matter?"

Another knight standing next to Kiolle asked him cautiously, sensing something was off. Kiolle then regained his composure and turned his pale face.

"Nothing... nothing at all. But why is everyone crowding around... one... person?"

"Listen, Sir Diarca, this man has...!"

The knight who had first attempted to attack Yuder came forward, excitedly opening his mouth like a fish out of water. With every word he uttered, the hostility towards Yuder among the knights escalated, and Kiolle's face turned increasingly pale.

"...So, it was time to teach this man, who dares to ignore the entire Imperial Knight, a lesson. Judging from his fearlessness, it appears he holds a significant rank. I believe it would be appropriate to discipline him first, and then expel the rest."

"...How could you do what even I couldn't?"

"Pardon?"

A knight who hadn't clearly heard Kiolle's muttered question asked for clarification, but Kiolle didn't repeat himself. With a quick intake of breath, Kiolle looked at Yuder, his face a mixture of unease and impatience.

"Y-you... No, what... What in the world are you doing here?"